

Scarring effects of the pandemic economy

COVID-19's ongoing impact on jobs, insecurity and social services in Victoria



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We respectfully acknowledge Elders past and present and remember that they have passed on their wisdom to us in various ways. Let us hold this in trust as we work and serve our communities.

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Executive summary

This is the final report delivered to Catholic Social Services Victoria and St Mary's House of Welcome for a project conducted through Australian Catholic University's (ACU) Stakeholder Engaged Scholarship Unit (SESU). The report addresses how the ongoing COVID-19 crisis will affect demand for social services in Victoria. Based on analysis of economic data from public and private agencies, it offers projections for FY2021/22 and FY2022/23, as well as parallel analyses for Greater Melbourne and regional Victoria.

THIS REPORT FINDS

1. The COVID-19 crisis is not just a pandemic in public health terms—it is also a pandemic of job loss and job market insecurity.

In job market terms, the pandemic has continued to be worse for women, worse for young workers and worse for Victorians. These inequalities have continued during the most recent Omicron Wave, as reflected in labour and supply shortages in critical industries. Detailed findings include the following:

- Low headline unemployment figures continue to mask the reality of job market insecurity. Following the profoundly negative experiences of the First and Second Wave lockdowns in 2020, Greater Melbourne's labour force shrank by 3.4 percent during the Third (Delta) Wave in late 2021 as thousands withdrew from the job market.
- Melbourne's female labour force fell by even more (5.8 percent) over the same period. The rate of female labour force participation fell from 63.9 percent to just 60.2 percent.
- Like the crisis in 2020, women and young workers during 2021's Delta Wave were more likely to be working in industries with the highest rates of job loss, such as hospitality, retail trade or the arts.

2. The Federal Government's economic response to COVID-19 was based on the exclusion of temporary migrants from basic social protection.

The decision to exclude temporary migrants from JobKeeper and JobSeeker plunged millions into financial hardship, generating destitution and untold suffering across our community. Detailed findings include the following:

- Almost half of Victoria's most recently arrived migrants (46.5 percent) came from countries in South or Central Asia. For this cohort, official unemployment—which is already an underestimate of true unemployment—peaked at a remarkable 24 percent, or around four times the rate for Australian-born workers.
- The impacts of policy exclusion should not be underestimated: prior to the pandemic, 1 in 18 workers in Victoria had arrived from overseas within the last 5 years (5.7 percent).

3. Despite low unemployment figures and political rhetoric, Victoria has experienced a weak and uneven economic recovery since 2020—a recovery which was stunted further by the experience of the Delta Wave.

Those experiencing the most vulnerability were worse off before and during the Delta Wave than before the First Wave of the pandemic in early 2020. Detailed findings include the following:

- Having more than doubled during the peak of the crisis in 2020, the number of JobSeeker recipients in Victoria was still 50 percent higher than pre-pandemic levels by June 2021, on the eve of the Delta Wave.
- By June 2021, jobactive caseload numbers in Victoria were double pre-pandemic levels, including sharp increases for women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients, and refugees.
- For recently arrived migrants, unemployment fell after the Second Wave but did not recover to pre-pandemic levels.



Images provided by St Mary's house of Welcome.

4. COVID-19 has profoundly affected the activities of social service providers in Victoria. Even during the current recovery phase, the pandemic has left a social and economic 'scarring' effect on those experiencing the most vulnerability or marginalisation, on victims of job loss and labour market insecurity, and on the capacity of social service providers to assist those left behind by our growth-oriented economy.

Organisations remain resilient and effective during challenging times, but ongoing problems highlight the need for further attention by policymakers. Detailed findings include the following:

- Organisations which depended upon retail sales for operating income were significantly affected. After many years of growth, retail sales for FY2019/20 and 2020/21 fell significantly.
- Volunteers—the lifeblood of social services—withdrew in large numbers during the crisis, a problem worsened for older volunteers and women. For some organisations, volunteer shifts declined by over half in 2021.
- Despite these challenges, demand for food distribution and meals in the community *increased significantly*. In some cases, the number of meals served more than doubled in 2020.
- In-bound calls for emergency relief fell during much of 2020 as many previous callers were able to benefit from the Coronavirus Supplement and related protective measures. In some cases, calls dropped by nearly 40 percent for FY2019/20. The gradual withdrawal of government assistance saw a return to pre-pandemic levels of demand.
- 2020 saw a significant change in the demographic composition of callers. The number of callers with no income, such as temporary migrants and international students excluded from JobKeeper or JobSeeker, increased by up to 13 times from January-August 2020.
- In-bound calls to organisations assisting victims of family violence also fell in 2020. Unlike calls for emergency relief, this did *not* reflect less need. Organisations reported an increase in the severity of family violence as well as an increase in perpetrators using public health orders as an excuse to worsen coercive and controlling behaviours.
- Many migrants excluded from social protection experienced impacts from 2020's crisis which spilled over into 2021 and beyond. By the end of 2021, the proportion of people seeking emergency relief who had no income was still more than double pre-pandemic levels.
- Volunteer numbers have not recovered to pre-pandemic levels. In part, this has reflected concerns over the Omicron Wave, the availability of Rapid Antigen Test kits, and ongoing shifts in COVID-safe practices, especially among older volunteers, those with disabilities, or those with existing medical conditions. This issue has significantly increased the organisational burden on active volunteers. The number of monthly hours per active volunteers increased by up to 5 times in 2021.



THIS REPORT CONCLUDES

These findings point to the need for:

- a significant and meaningful rise in key welfare transfers, including and especially JobSeeker;
- renewed government investment in, and expansion of, public and social housing;
- ongoing and expanded funding for social service providers, including providers of emergency relief, accommodation and related services, due to the shortfall of volunteers and the significantly greater burden on active volunteers working in the community.

In summary, government—both Federal and State—must recognise that millions have been permanently affected by the pandemic, that labour markets have not fully recovered despite low headline unemployment figures, and that thousands of community members experiencing the most vulnerability are being left behind as Victoria and Australia emerge from the pandemic.

SCOPE OF THE REPORT

The report documents, analyses, and develops projections about the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on two levels.

First, it generates findings at a macro-level in terms of changes to:

- unemployment and under-employment among women and men;
- youth unemployment;
- socio-economic conditions for temporary migrants excluded from JobKeeper and JobSeeker, including international students, asylum seekers and refugees;
- poverty, income support and homelessness.

Second, the report generates findings at a micro-level in terms of changes to the operations, experiences and challenges of social service providers in Victoria related to:

- emergency relief;
- food distribution in the community;
- help for those experiencing homelessness;
- help for victims of family violence;
- changing revenue streams;
- changing demographic characteristics of people seeking assistance;
- changing capabilities of organisations affected by public health orders, including those related to extended lockdowns, vaccination programs and staff or volunteer withdrawal and shortages.

The report presents findings from five key periods:

1. Pre-Pandemic—before February/March 2020;
2. the First Wave—March-June 2020;
3. the Second Wave in Victoria—June-October 2020;
4. the ‘Zero COVID’ Hiatus—October 2020-June 2021;
5. the Third (Delta) Wave—July-November 2021.

Many of the report’s insights are also relevant to the current period, including the ‘Fourth (Omicron) Wave’ of the pandemic which began in December 2021.

1. Introduction

This is the final report delivered to Catholic Social Services Victoria and St Mary's House of Welcome for a project conducted through Australian Catholic University's (ACU) Stakeholder Engaged Scholarship Unit (SESU). Our guiding research question has been: 'How will the COVID-19 crisis affect demand for social services?'

This report is about Victoria, with parallel analyses for Greater Melbourne and regional Victoria, as well as inclusion of some national-level trends for comparative purposes. The report is framed to take account of change over five time periods:

1. Pre-Pandemic—before February/March 2020
2. the First Wave—March-June 2020
3. the Second Wave in Victoria—June-October 2020
4. the 'Zero COVID' Hiatus—October 2020-June 2021
5. the Third (Delta) Wave—July-November 2021.

The course of the pandemic over these time periods forced Victoria, and Melbourne in particular, to endure six periods of lockdown. The report also offers insights which are relevant to the current period, including the 'Fourth (Omicron) Wave' of the pandemic which began in December 2021.

The report provides analysis and findings across four main sections. Section 2 focuses on the 'headline' problems of unemployment and under-employment during the five phases mentioned above (Pre-pandemic, First Wave, Second Wave, Zero-COVID Hiatus, Third Wave). This section provides a comparative analysis of trends and forecasts nationally with trends in Victoria, as well as differences between Greater Melbourne and regional Victoria, and between the experiences of women and men. It finds that headline trends in unemployment continue to conceal the slowness of the economy to recover in terms of jobs growth and labour force numbers, as well as the profoundly negative impact of the recent Third Wave upon this process of recovery.

Section 3 explores these underlying weaknesses and inequalities by focusing on the experience of hundreds of thousands of low-income workers and welfare recipients during the Zero COVID Hiatus and the Third Wave. After briefly summarising the effects of JobKeeper and the Coronavirus Supplement, this section explores the lasting impacts of job market insecurity on young workers, women, and those jobseekers experiencing the most vulnerability such as refugees and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Drawing data from unemployment trends and jobactive caseload numbers until late 2021, the report finds that labour market security failed to ‘bounce back’ for hundreds of thousands of unemployed and precariously employed workers. The report’s evidence shows that these groups of people were in a *more precarious* situation as the Third Wave crisis emerged when compared to the situation prior to the First Wave in early 2020. The Third Wave only made this prevailing problem worse.

Section 4 focuses on the problem and lasting effects of exclusion: specifically, the Federal Government’s decision to exclude millions of temporary migrants from core protections during the ‘COVID recession’ of 2020, including and especially the JobKeeper scheme, the re-badged JobSeeker payment, and the Coronavirus Supplement which mitigated against financial hardship for millions of people in the 12 months following the beginning of the First Wave. As well as distilling findings from secondary source material on the experiences of temporary visa holders, this section offers original analysis of differential unemployment trends among recently arrived migrants.

Section 5—the final section—explores the relationship between the COVID crisis and the activities of service providers in Victoria. Using original analysis of anonymised data from key agencies, this section outlines changes to revenue streams, food insecurity and meal provision, the changing profile of emergency relief recipients, the mitigating impact of emergency fiscal measures in 2020, and assistance and services for women and children experiencing family violence, and for volunteers. The section concludes the report by drawing on quantitative and qualitative data from nine social service providers who operate across Melbourne and regional Victoria.

2. The False Optimism of Low Unemployment Numbers: Changing job markets for women and men in Victoria since 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic created an unprecedented social and economic crisis, reflected in rising unemployment, ballooning under-employment, and rising financial precarity (van Barneveld et al., 2020; Coibion et al., 2020; Connell, 2020). As is now well understood, unemployment rose sharply following the onset of the pandemic in Australia in February 2020, which was followed by border closures and the initiation of lockdowns across the country. Australia-wide, unemployment increased quickly from 5.1 percent in February 2020 to 6.4 percent in April 2020. During the First Wave, unemployment peaked at 7.4 percent in June/July 2020. Due largely to the impact of the Second Wave in Victoria, unemployment increased again in September 2020, having fallen back at the beginning of FY2020/21 under the influence of the Federal Government's emergency fiscal measures.

After October 2020, unemployment began to decline to levels slightly below those experienced under the pre-pandemic economy. From October 2020 until June 2021, Australia experienced an 8-month period in which community transmission of COVID-19 was largely suppressed—a 'Zero-COVID hiatus'. This allowed for an end to the Second Wave lockdown restrictions experienced in Victoria, although the main features of Australia's closed border regime remained intact. In February 2021, the Federal Government launched a vaccination program, creating further hope of a return to 'post-COVID normal' economic conditions.

Despite this hope, Victoria entered two brief lockdowns in February and May 2021. Then, in late June 2021, a Third Wave of the pandemic began in the eastern suburbs of Sydney, swiftly spreading the more-infectious Delta variant of coronavirus across the country. As a result, Victoria

entered its fifth lockdown for two weeks in July. In August, Victoria entered its sixth lockdown as coronavirus case numbers continued to rise.¹

A key feature of this most recent period of extended lockdown is that the official rate of unemployment did not rise as it did after the outbreak of the First and Second Waves in 2020. Nationally, unemployment peaked at 7.4 percent in July 2020 at the end of the First Wave, with a higher peak for women (7.5 percent). Under the impact of the Second Wave in Victoria, national unemployment again approached 7 percent, peaking at 7.1 percent for women in November 2020 (Figure 2.1). In Victoria, the context of the Second Wave pushed state unemployment back over 7 percent, peaking at 7.3 percent in October 2020 (Figure 2.2).

But the unemployment rate did not rise, nationally or in Victoria, following the onset of the Third Wave in mid-2021; in fact, unemployment remained at a relatively stable, low level throughout the Third Wave. Monthly unemployment averaged 4.7 percent from July–November 2021 for both Australia and Victoria. In the context of another extended period of lockdown, the suspension of normal economic activity, as well as a less comprehensive fiscal response by the Federal Government compared to previous waves in 2020, such statistics appear as unexpectedly—even miraculously—low.

The Federal Government has emphasised this point as an achievement of policy. Prime Minister Scott Morrison recently suggested that 'we can now achieve an unemployment rate with a "three" in front of it this year... We have not seen this in Australia for almost half a century' (cited in Brinsden, 2022). However, the emphasis on the official unemployment rate as the key measure of societal success

1. Regional Victoria briefly escaped lockdown in mid-August 2021 before returning to lockdown—its seventh in total—by the end of that month.

creates a misleading view of social and economic wellbeing, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The idea that the official rate significantly underestimates the true rate of unemployment has been widely discussed by economic analysts (Kennedy, 2020; Roy Morgan, 2021). In this report, we focus on alternative measures of labour market performance—measures of equal or even greater importance than the official unemployment rate—which suggest that economic life has not ‘bounced back’ to pre-pandemic levels, especially for those experiencing the most vulnerability.

First, total employment in Victoria had barely recovered to pre-pandemic levels by the end of 2021. Following the onset of the First and Second Waves in 2020, total employment in Melbourne collapsed by 7.6 percent (February-August quarters). In regional Victoria, total employment fell by 3.4 percent. After a period of gradual recovery during the Zero-COVID Hiatus, total employment in Melbourne fell again by 0.5 percent following the onset of the Third Wave (August-November quarters 2021). Importantly, total employment in Greater Melbourne at the end of 2021 (November quarter) remained 0.3 percent lower than pre-pandemic employment (February quarter 2020)—it had not recovered to pre-pandemic levels despite the falling unemployment rate (Figure 2.3).

Second, similar conclusions can be gleaned by looking at time-series data for labour force size and labour force participation. Following the onset of the First and Second Waves in 2020, the total size of Greater Melbourne’s workforce collapsed by 8.1 percent (February-September) (Figure 2.4). In regional Victoria, the labour force declined by 2.7 percent over the same period (Figure 2.5). During the

Zero-COVID Hiatus, Melbourne’s labour force recovered to pre-pandemic levels, rising by 8.8 percent from September 2020-March 2021. However, the labour force was already beginning to weaken and decline *before* the Third Wave began. In April 2021, for example, Melbourne’s labour force fell by 1.9 percent.

The onset of the Third Wave brought about much more severe declines to an already-weakened labour market, shrinking Melbourne’s labour force by 4.4 percent from August-October 2021. From peak to trough in 2021 (March-October), the labour force declined by 6.1 percent, which is equivalent to over 175,000 people leaving the labour force. Although labour force numbers began to rise after this low point, the labour force was 1.8 percent smaller in November 2021 than in February 2020; that is, Melbourne’s labour force was smaller by the beginning of summer than it was prior to the pandemic.

These trends are strongly influenced by the collapse in immigration numbers under Australia’s closed border regime which operated for most of 2020 and 2021. However, they are also reflected in the labour force *participation rate*. For Greater Melbourne, labour force participation remained lower in November 2021 than it had been prior to the pandemic in February 2020.

A third indicator of economic health is the number of hours of paid work undertaken in Victoria. Figure 2.6 demonstrates that the total number of hours declined in Greater Melbourne by as much as 13.2 percent during the First and Second Waves, declining by 9.8 percent in regional Victoria over the same period. By May 2021, total hours worked had recovered to surpass pre-pandemic levels in Greater Melbourne, though not in regional Victoria.

The impact of the Third Wave saw further declines in total hours worked of 8.6 percent and 4.7 percent respectively. By late 2021, total hours worked were lower than during the pre-pandemic period, by 6.9 percent in Greater Melbourne and 6.7 percent for regional Victoria. In short, the impact of successive waves of the pandemic meant that by the end of 2021, despite a falling official rate of unemployment, Victoria's labour market and economy had barely recovered in terms of total employment and labour force participation and had weakened significantly in terms of total hours worked.

A final indicator considered in this section concerns the number of people who involuntarily withdrew from the labour force during extended periods of lockdown. One reason that the official rate of unemployment is an overly conservative and relatively narrow measure of true unemployment is because it is calculated on the basis of people not currently in paid work but who are 'actively looking for work and available to start immediately'. This measure does not include people who are not actively looking for work—i.e., 'passively' looking—or those actively looking but unable to start work within one month. This final category includes people who may prefer to be in paid work but have stopped looking because it is not currently practical or realistic to do so. These individuals are regarded as *outside* the formal labour force and, therefore, not counted in calculations of the official unemployment rate.

Consequently, the proportion of people outside the labour force who are not looking for work provides a further indicator of the functional health of labour markets. Note that this indicator does not include those who have withdrawn permanently from the labour force such as retirees. Figure 2.7 presents this data for Victoria over the period from early 2020, before the onset of the pandemic, until late 2021 after the cessation of the Third Wave. According to this data, this proportion rose from 49.7 percent in February 2020 to a peak of 53.9 percent in June 2020. It did not fall back below 50 percent until December 2020 when Victoria was experiencing its Zero-COVID Hiatus. After declining for much of 2021, the impact of the Third Wave pushed this proportion back above 50 percent in September and October. This represented over a million people in Victoria during the peak of the Third Wave. In September 2021, there were over 188,000 more people in this category than in March 2021 when numbers reached a trough (Figure 2.7).

THE UNEQUAL IMPACT ON WOMEN

A key feature of labour market insecurity in Victoria during the pandemic has been a greater impact on women (Carson et al., 2020; ACTU, 2021; Wood et al., 2021). In contrast to the national unemployment rate, women's unemployment was *already* higher than men's unemployment in Victoria prior to the pandemic. Although the gap between the two rates shrank during the First Wave, it widened considerably during the Second Wave. Female unemployment peaked 2.4 points higher than male unemployment in October 2020 at 8.6 percent compared to 6.2 percent (Figure 2.8).

In terms of parallel indicators of women's economic status, total female employment in Greater Melbourne fell by 8.8 percent following the onset of the First and Second Waves in 2020, a significantly higher proportion than male employment. Female employment also fell by a higher proportion than male employment in regional Victoria (4.8 percent). Although female unemployment in Melbourne fell much more modestly during the Second Wave, it remained lower in the November quarter of 2021 than it had been during the pre-pandemic period (February quarter 2020) (Figure 2.9).

Like total employment, the female labour force declined by a greater proportion than the male labour force, falling by 9.2 percent following the onset of the First and Second Waves in 2020 (February-September) (Figure 2.10). In regional Victoria, the female labour force declined by 4.3 percent over the same period (Figure 2.11). During the Third Wave in 2021, the female labour force in Melbourne again declined by a greater proportion than men, falling by 6.9 percent from March to October. Like labour force numbers overall, the female labour force for both Melbourne and regional Victoria was smaller in November 2021 than at the beginning of 2020. For Melbourne, female labour force participation in November 2021 was lower than it had been in February 2020.

BALLOONING YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

A further sign of the greater impact of the COVID recession in Victoria compared to the rest of Australia was youth unemployment. Prior to the pandemic, youth unemployment was generally lower in Victoria than nationally. During the First Wave, youth unemployment in Victoria began to rise above the national level, exceeding 16 percent by June 2020 before ballooning, under the impact of the Second Wave, to 18.1 percent in October. By this time, national youth unemployment was (a still high) 14.5 percent, or 3.6 points lower. During the Third Wave, youth unemployment peaked at 15.3 percent in October 2021. Even by November 2021, after the worst effects of the Third Wave had begun to subside, youth unemployment in Victoria remained higher than the national level (Figure 2.12). Ballooning youth unemployment reflected the concentration of young workers in sectors which were highly sensitive to community lockdowns, such as accommodation and food services, or that were more likely to be dependent upon casual work.

A further indication of changes in labour market composition was an apparent connection between the percentage of people enrolled in tertiary education institutions and not in the labour force—i.e., including those young workers who had temporarily given up looking for work during the crisis—and rising youth unemployment (Figure 2.13).

JOB LOSSES BY SECTOR

From the March to the September quarter of 2020 (i.e., from the pre-pandemic period to the decline of the Second Wave), total employment in Victoria fell by 2.9 percent. This decline was concentrated in some sectors more than others. For example, the largest employing sector, healthcare and social assistance, which includes early childhood education/care and home care services, experienced a lower 2.4 percent decline. The second and third largest sectors pre-pandemic—retail trade and professional, scientific, and technical services—experienced *increases* in employment of 8.2 and 3.7 percent, respectively over the same period.

In contrast, employment in construction and manufacturing declined by 3.1 and 10.4 percent, respectively. Employment in accommodation and food services fell by 18.9 percent. Although education/training increased by 4.3 percent, this aggregation masks the serious decline in higher education jobs in this category (Littleton and Stanford, 2021).

The impact of the Third Wave saw further significant declines in jobs across these industries in 2021. From the August–November quarters, manufacturing jobs declined by 9.4 percent. By the November quarter of 2021, there were 10.6 percent fewer manufacturing jobs in Victoria than there had been in February 2020, prior to the pandemic. While construction jobs did not decline, there was virtually no growth in construction employment throughout 2021. The Third Wave also brought about jobs decline in hospitality (-5.5 percent) as well as transport, postal and warehousing jobs (-4.0 percent) (Figure 2.14).

This timescale also masks the severity of the decline for many sectors and, conversely, the effectiveness of fiscal measures designed to save jobs during the First Wave (see below). Despite Victoria's Zero-COVID Hiatus from late 2020 to mid-2021, several sectors did not recover fully from the severe job losses experienced in early 2020. This observation is based upon analysis in Figure 2.15, which records quarterly changes to employment in selected industries. The selection criterion for Figure 2.15 was sectors which recorded a job decline during the First and Second Waves (March quarter–December quarter 2020) of 10 percent or greater.

Quarterly labour force data shows that the largest proportional decline in employment among these industries was arts and recreation, which experienced a cumulative decline of 21.2 percent during the First and Second Waves, followed by an even larger decline of 32.6 percent during the Third Wave. This was followed by agriculture, forestry and fishing, which fell by 28.8 percent during the first two waves of the pandemic, especially as international border closures saw a collapse in the seasonal agricultural workforce. The Third Wave saw a further 20.3 percent fall in employment in this sector.

In terms of job loss by volume, the key sectors were manufacturing and hospitality. The former stood at over 294,000 jobs prior to the pandemic in Victoria. By the June quarter 2021, manufacturing employment had fallen to approximately 273,000. The latter stood at over 222,000 jobs prior to the pandemic, before declining to less than 221,000 over the same period. The Third Wave brought about further contractions of 3.8 and 6.7 percent in these sectors, respectively (Figure 2.15). In short, those sectors in which labour markets had been weakened severely by the events of 2020 experienced another serious contraction during the Third Wave in 2021.

A CRISIS OF LABOUR MARKET INSECURITY AND UNDER-EMPLOYMENT

It is now widely accepted that the Federal Government's emergency fiscal expansion over the 12 months from March 2020 placed a protective 'floor' beneath the social and economic crisis. Fiscal policy softened the impact of the crisis and prevented a catastrophic collapse in living standards and social cohesion. Keynote measures included subsidies to business, 'safe harbour' provisions under insolvency trading law, the JobKeeper scheme, the Coronavirus Supplement and a temporary suspension of mutual obligation requirements under the rebadged JobSeeker scheme.

It is equally understood that the Coronavirus Supplement had a major impact on the material wellbeing of millions of jobless workers and poorer households (DAE/ACOSS, 2020). A survey of 634 welfare recipients from the Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) in August 2020 found that 81 percent were eating better and more regularly, 71 percent had been able to catch up on bills, and 68 percent had been able to pay for medical or health expenses. Most of these recipients were experiencing long-term disadvantage, with half having received a payment for over two years and over half (55 percent) living in private rental arrangements (ACOSS, 2020).

Having similarly found that the Coronavirus Supplement helped to reduce poverty and marginalisation, a more recent study of 113 people found that its withdrawal led to negative mental health impacts among 63 percent of respondents, negative financial security impacts (57 percent) and negative housing impacts (44 percent). 63 percent reported that withdrawal affected their 'ability to eat well'. In the absence of more comprehensive support from government, the majority had sought emergency relief, with around a third seeking helping to pay for food. This research also found that rent relief and a cessation of rent increases and tenancy evictions in 2020 played a key role in making life better during the First and Second Waves (Wilson et al., 2021).

Elsewhere, Porter and Bowman (2021) found that the weakening of COVID support payments lowered the financial 'resilience' of low-income households, with single parents having a significantly weakened capacity to meet material commitments such as paying rent or household bills after the end of the Second Wave compared to the pre-pandemic period.

According to analysis by Homelessness Australia (2021), there was a 4.2 percent decline in the number of people presenting themselves to homelessness services in the year to FY2020/21, due in a large part to the Coronavirus Supplement. As the policy was wound down, there was a sudden leap in numbers. From August–September 2020, when the Coronavirus Supplement dropped by \$100 per week, there was a 3.6 percent increase in that month alone.

JobKeeper was particularly effective in enabling businesses to retain workers on the payroll. In the first phase of JobKeeper (30 March–27 September 2020) eligible businesses and not-for-profits were able to receive \$1,500 (before tax) per fortnight per employee to cover the cost of wages. In the second phase (28 September 2020–3 January 2021), the rate was reduced to \$1,200 per fortnight for employees who averaged 20 hours or more a week and \$750 for employees who worked fewer than 20 hours a week. In its final phase (4 January 2021–28 March 2021), the rate was \$1,000 per fortnight for employees who worked 20 hours or more a week

on average and \$650 for employees who worked fewer than 20 hours a week (Australian Government, 2021).

Largely because of government fiscal measures such as JobKeeper, unemployment did not reach the most pessimistic 'depression scale' forecasts of early 2020. In terms of jobs overall, therefore, 2020 became a crisis of labour market insecurity and *under*-employment rather than headline unemployment.

However, the impact of the extended lockdown during the Second Wave meant that under-employment was experienced more sharply in Victoria in 2020 than elsewhere. Nationally, under-employment increased from 8.8 percent in March 2020 to 13.6 percent in April 2020. After this time, under-employment gradually subsided to reach pre-pandemic levels by early 2021. In Victoria, by contrast, under-employment peaked at a higher level during the First Wave (14.6 percent in May 2020) and, after briefly falling, increased during the Second Wave to 15 percent by September 2020.

Overall, under-employment nearly doubled in Victoria compared to pre-pandemic levels. Although it began to fall after this peak, under-employment has remained consistently higher in Victoria than the national average since the depth of the crisis in 2020 and began to rise sharply again during the Third Wave (Figure 2.16).

A notable feature in Victoria was the narrowing of the prevailing *under*-employment gap between women and men. Whereas the crisis of unemployment disproportionately impacted on women's jobs, the crisis of under-employment during the Second Wave saw a sharper increase in unmet demand for working hours by men. Prior to the pandemic, under-employment was consistently higher for women than men. In the 12 months prior to the pandemic, under-employment for women was an average of 10.2 percent (based on monthly data) compared to 6.7 percent for men, or 3.5 points higher on average. During the First Wave, female under-employment remained higher, peaking at 15.9 percent, 2.9 points higher than male under-employment, in April 2020.

However, male under-employment increased sharply during the Second Wave, peaking at 15.2 percent in September 2020, to rise briefly above female under-employment. This meant that male under-employment was more than double pre-pandemic norms during the height of the Second Wave (Figure 2.17). These trends—of relatively high unemployment for women but relatively high under-employment for men—reflect the greater exposure of women to employment in sectors which shed the most jobs. In contrast, men were more likely to be employed in sectors where jobs were retained through the JobKeeper scheme and related fiscal measures.

ECONOMIC FORECASTING DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

Due to the unpredictability of the pandemic's effects, the task of long-term macroeconomic forecasting—one already over-burdened with hidden assumptions—became virtually untenable during the First and Second Waves. The problem of forecasting was aptly put in a McKinsey industry report released during the time of the Second Wave:

In a stable economic environment, leaders may be able to make long-term forecasts with confidence, grounding policies in far-sighted knowledge. But when the economic outlook leads the [Reserve Bank] to note in May that 'The pace of recovery beyond the June quarter is especially uncertain', it makes sense to set aside a quest for a reliable long-run prediction (Armour et al., 2020: 23).

The volatility of change since this time reinforce this point significantly, including the unexpected pace of rebounding national employment over the summer of 2020/21 followed by the shock of the Third Wave from June onwards. It is evident that key Federal Government assumptions during May 2021's Budget—for example, that 'localised outbreaks of COVID-19 are assumed to occur [in 2021] but are effectively contained' (Australian Government, 2021: 36)—did not apply. As Armour et al. (2020) imply, empirically grounded, shorter-term forecasts are more desirable in these circumstances.

As an indication of this challenge, we compare forecasts from Federal and Victorian State Government Budget Papers released in May 2021—during a period of reverberating employment growth—with forecasts from more recent data during the onset of the Third Wave, including the Federal Government's Midyear Economic and Fiscal Outlook (MYEFO) released in December 2021 and private data from Deloitte Access Economics (DAE) employment growth analysis for the June and September quarters 2021.

Looking back to May, Federal Government Budget Papers predicted national employment growth of 6.5 percent for FY2020/21 on the back of resurgent growth over the previous summer, a prediction which proved to be accurate as economic activity recovered following the First and Second Waves. In Victoria, however, employment growth was much lower for 2020/21 (1.0 percent), reflecting the differential impact of the Second Wave on the state compared to the rest of Australia. In contrast, DAE analysis found that employment in Victoria *shrank* by 0.6 percent in 2020/21, including a 2.1 percent decline in Regional Victoria.

While Victorian Treasury forecasts for 2021/22 remained at 2.5 percent throughout most of last year, DAE revised their 2021/22 employment growth forecast down due to the impact of the Third Wave. Whereas DAE's forecasts in the June quarter 2021 were for a 3.3 percent rise in Victoria and a 3.6 percent rise in Greater Melbourne, their forecasts in the September quarter were revised down to 1.8 and 1.9 percent respectively. For regional Victoria, their forecast was revised down from 2.5 to 1.6 percent.

State Treasury and DAE forecasts for 2022/23 are similar for Victoria (1.5 and 1.3 percent respectively), with the latter predicting a 1.5 percent increase for Greater Melbourne based on September quarter forecasting (Figure 2.18). Despite some differences, the general view is that moderate employment growth will occur in the near future but the chance of rapid employment growth has been thwarted by the impact of the Third Wave.

The impact of the Third Wave similarly downgraded DAE forecasts for key industries or sectors of Victoria's economy for 2021/22. Whereas June quarter analysis forecast large recoveries in high employing sectors, these were revised down significantly in the September quarter. These include accommodation and food services (revised from 17.3 to 8.9 percent), construction (6.8 to 4.3 percent), professional, scientific and technical services (4.8 to 3.3 percent) and the largest-employing sector, healthcare and social assistance (3.6 to 2.8 percent). DAE forecasted for zero growth in manufacturing and a 3.7 percent contraction in retail trade (Figures 2.19 and 2.20).²

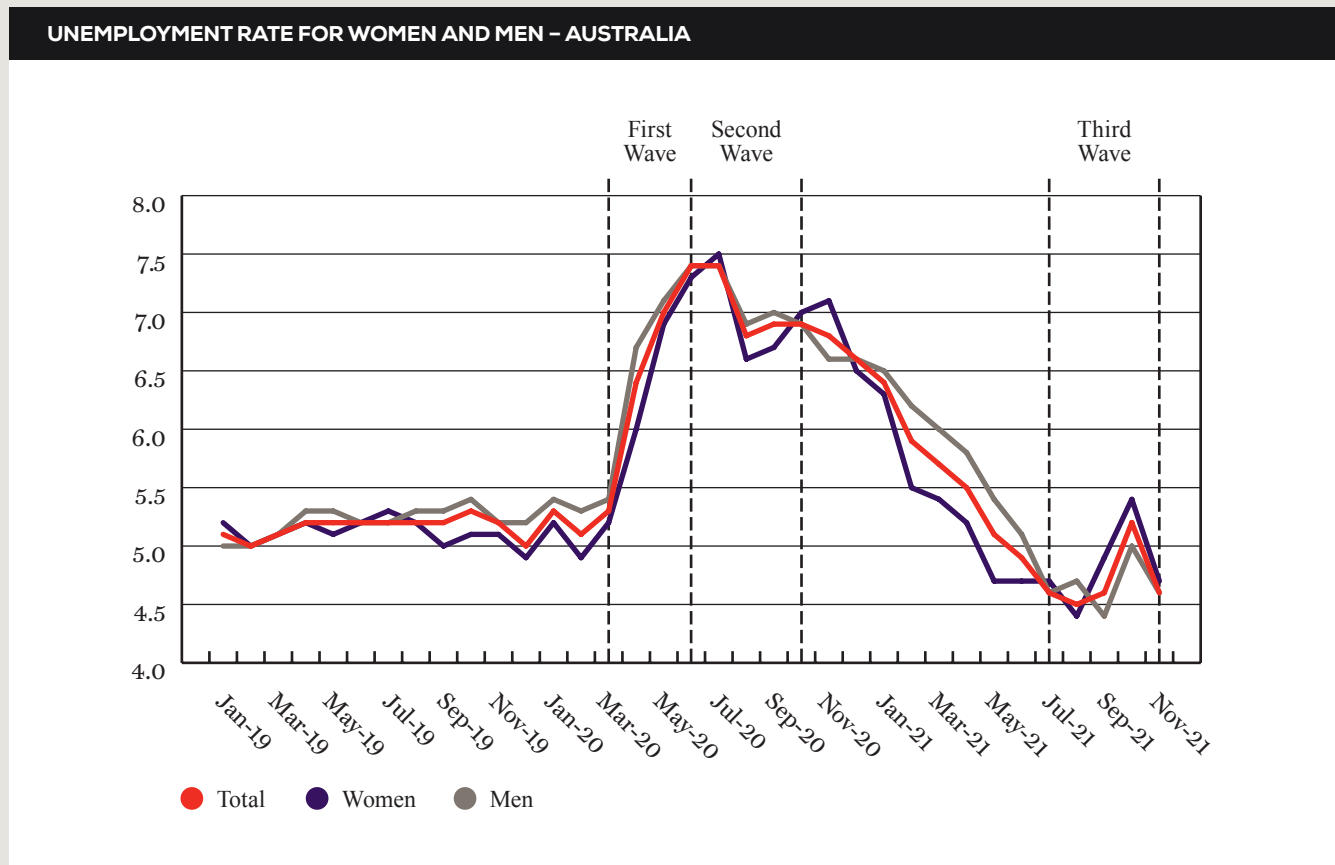
A final dimension from this forecast data for the near-term is DAE's distinction between 'white collar' and 'blue collar' sectors. Forecasts for white collar sectors are close to growth forecasts for all employment in Victoria. DAE records a 1.5 percent increase for the last FY2020/21 and predicts 3.2 percent for FY2021/22 (Figure 2.21).

However, trends for blue collar sectors are more volatile. Employment growth in these sectors shrank by a sizeable 5.7 percent in 2020/21. In the June quarter 2021, DAE expected blue-collar jobs to rebound by 3.5 percent in 2021/22. However, the impact of the Third Wave led them to revise this forecast during the September quarter to a 1.7 percent *decline*. Although we live in a service-based economy—for every blue-collar job in Victoria, there are approximately 2.5 white-collar jobs—such a sharp contraction in blue-collar employment, including the loss of nearly 53,000 jobs for 2020/21, suggests that the social disruption of labour market 'churn' in this sector has been much greater (Figure 2.22).

Trends in blue-collar job volatility were sharper in Greater Melbourne, which recorded a 6.1 percent decline for 2020/21 and a forecast 2.6 percent decline for 2021/22 (Figures 2.23 and 2.24). This shows that nearly three-quarters (73 percent) of Victorian blue-collar jobs lost in the last financial year were concentrated in Greater Melbourne.

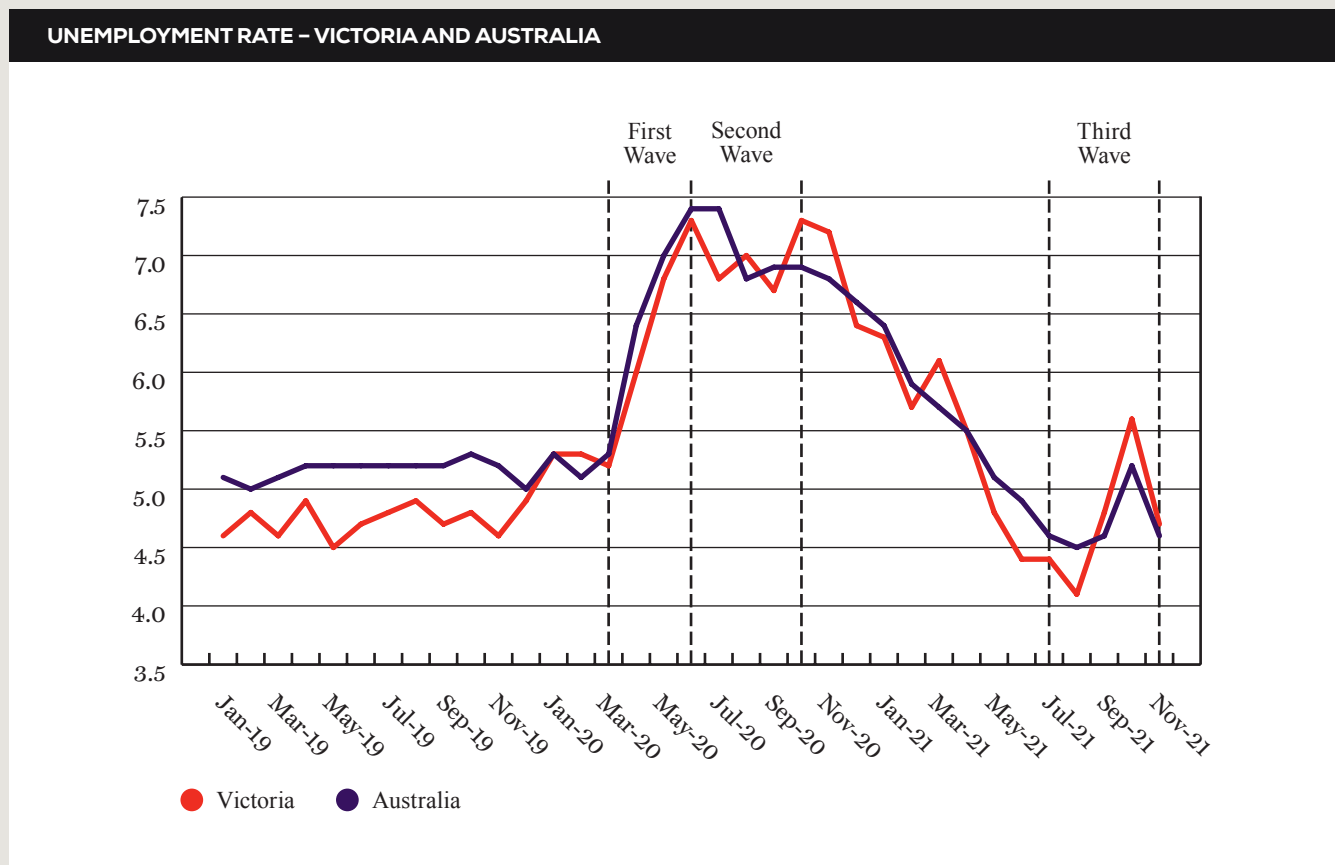
2. Forecasts for Greater Melbourne and regional Victoria are broadly similar. Data can be provided upon request.

FIGURE 2.1



Source: Authors' calculations of data from ABS (2021)

FIGURE 2.2



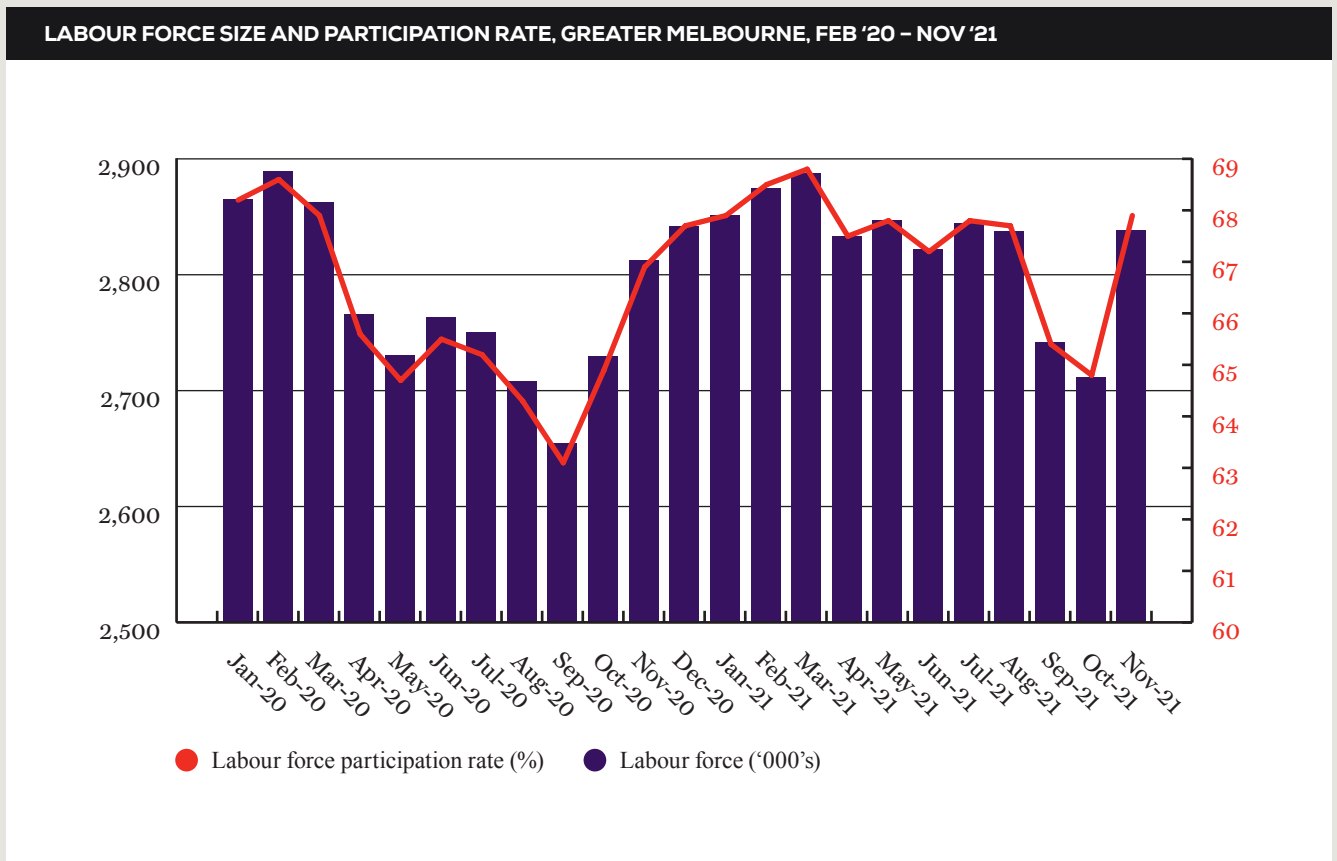
Source: Authors' calculations of data from ABS (2021)

FIGURE 2.3



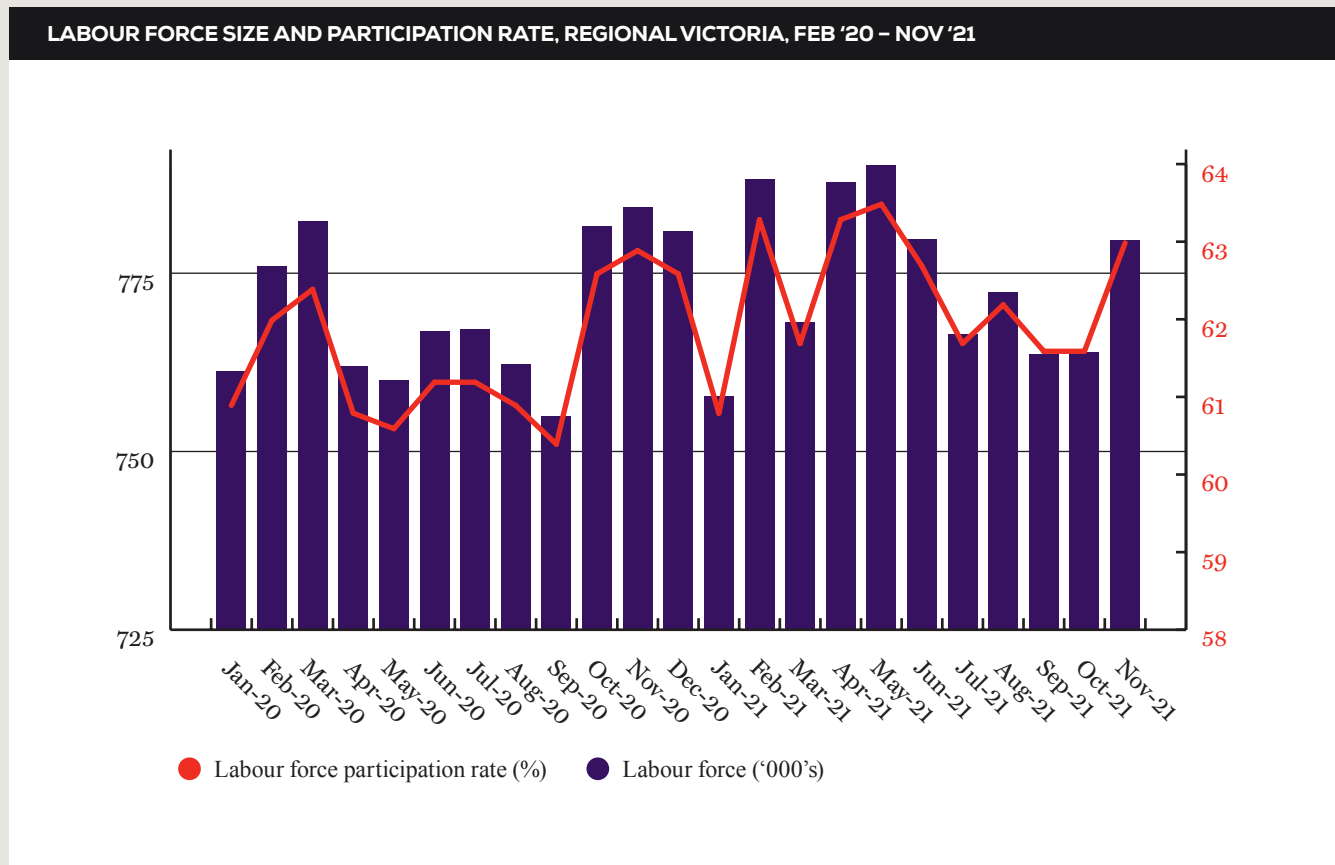
Source: Authors' calculations of data from ABS (2021)

FIGURE 2.4



Source: Authors' calculations of data from ABS (2021)

FIGURE 2.5



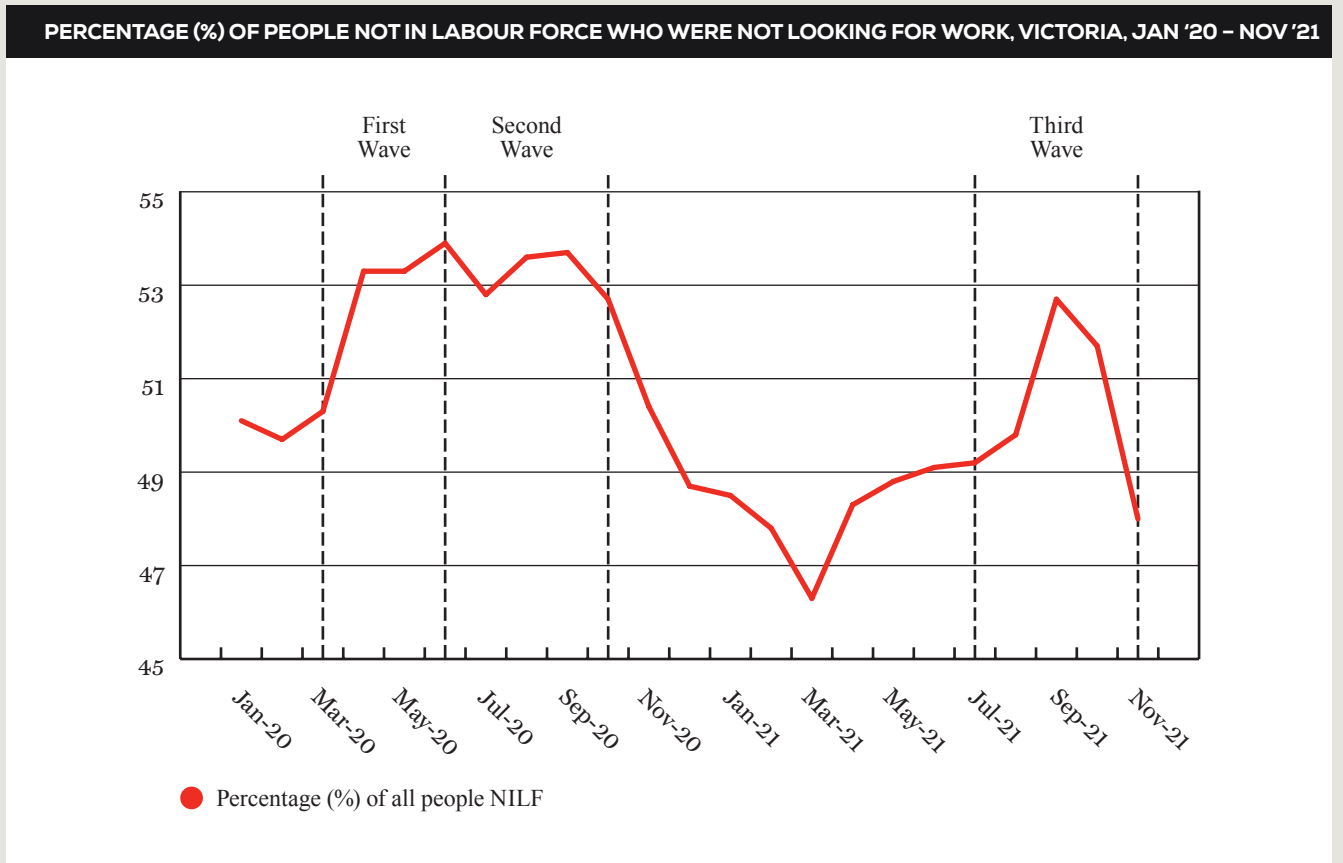
Source: Authors' calculations of data from ABS (2021)

FIGURE 2.6



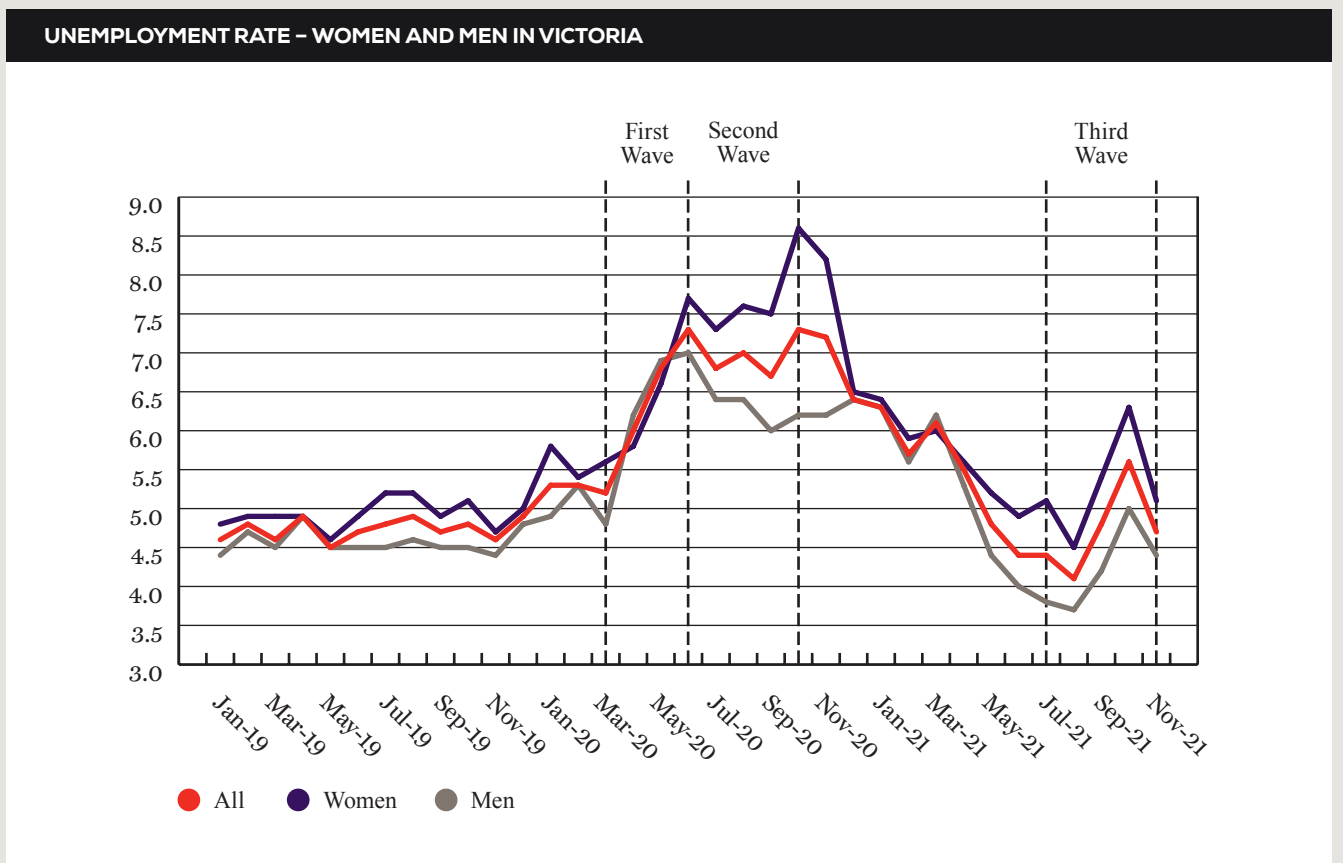
Source: Authors' calculations of data from ABS (2021)

FIGURE 2.7



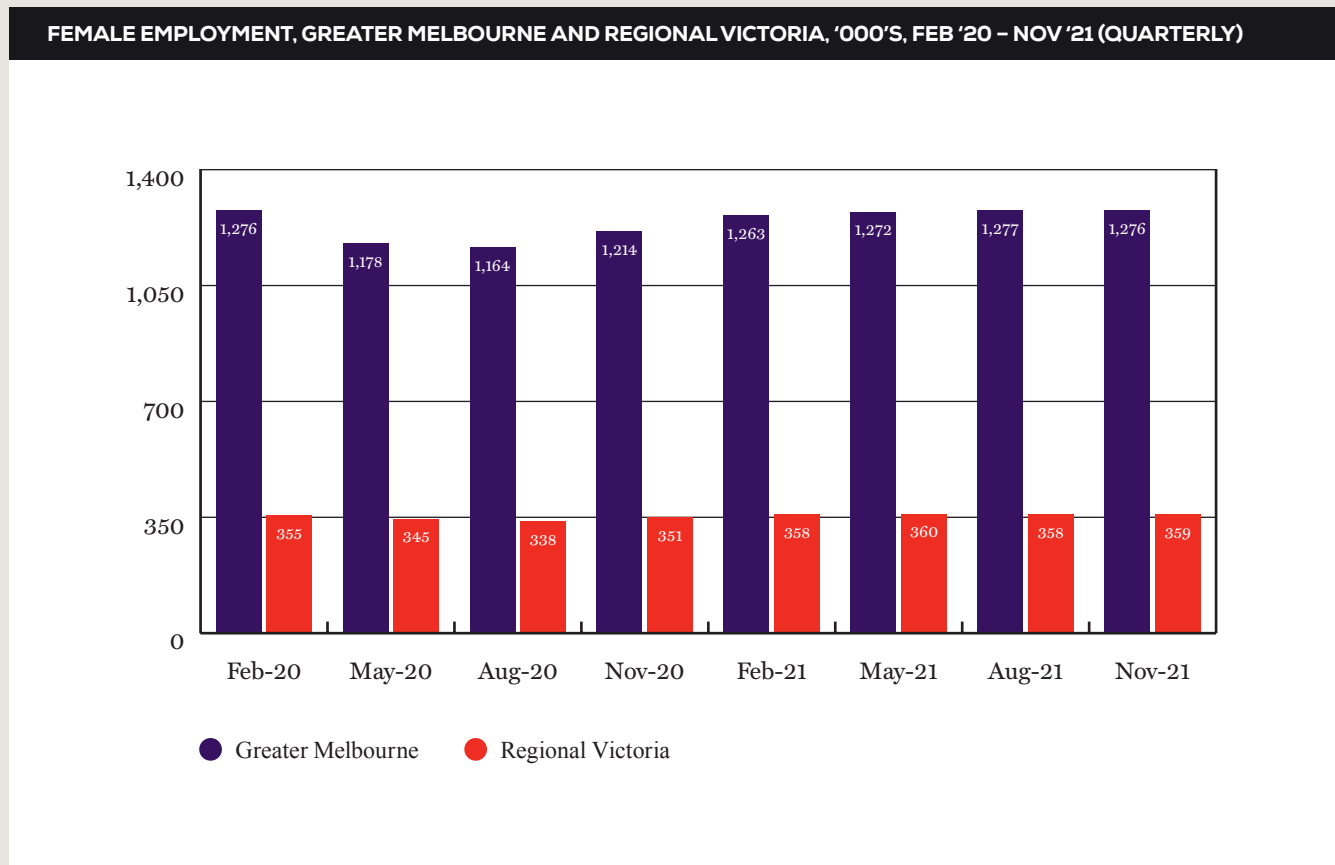
Source: Authors' calculations of data from ABS (2021)

FIGURE 2.8



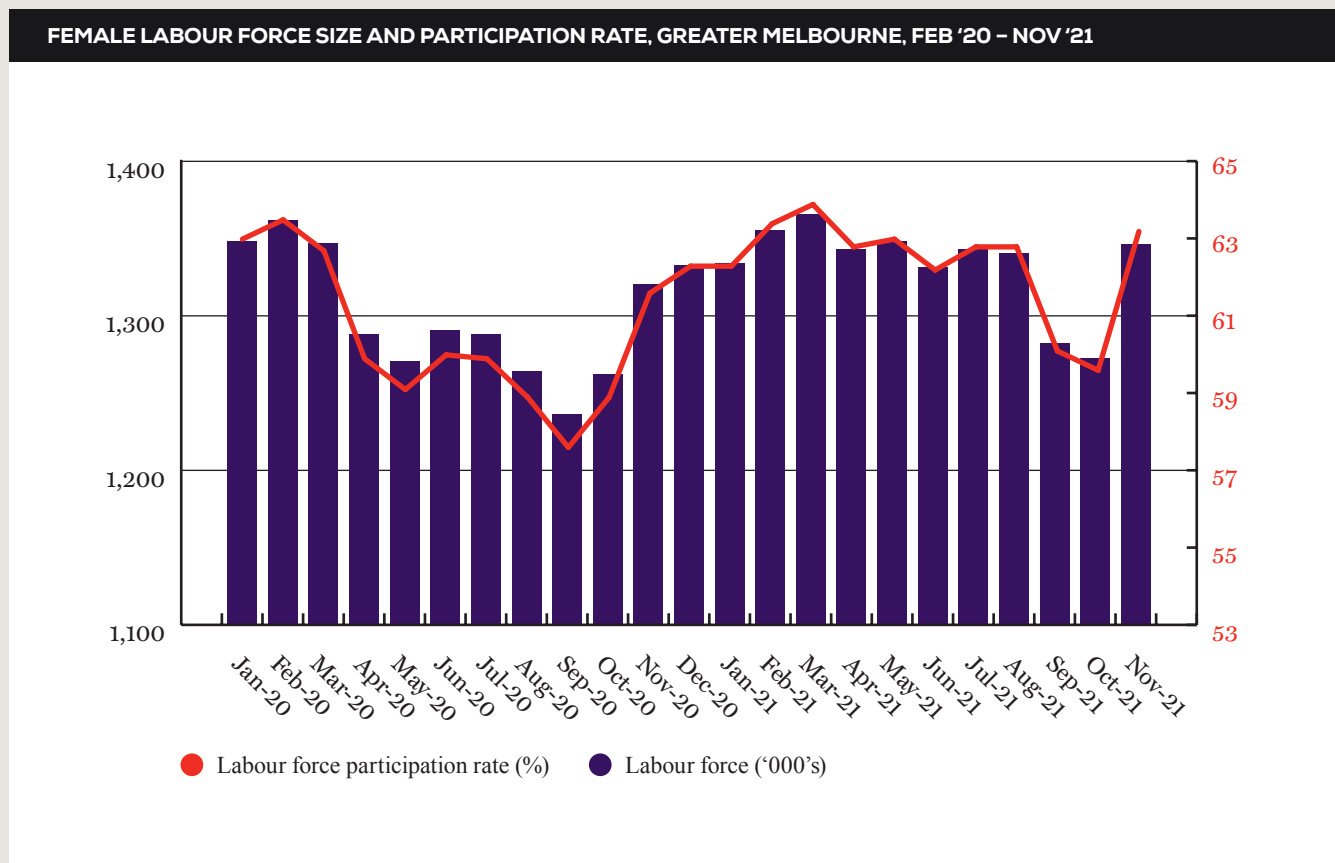
Source: Authors' calculations of data from ABS (2021)

FIGURE 2.9



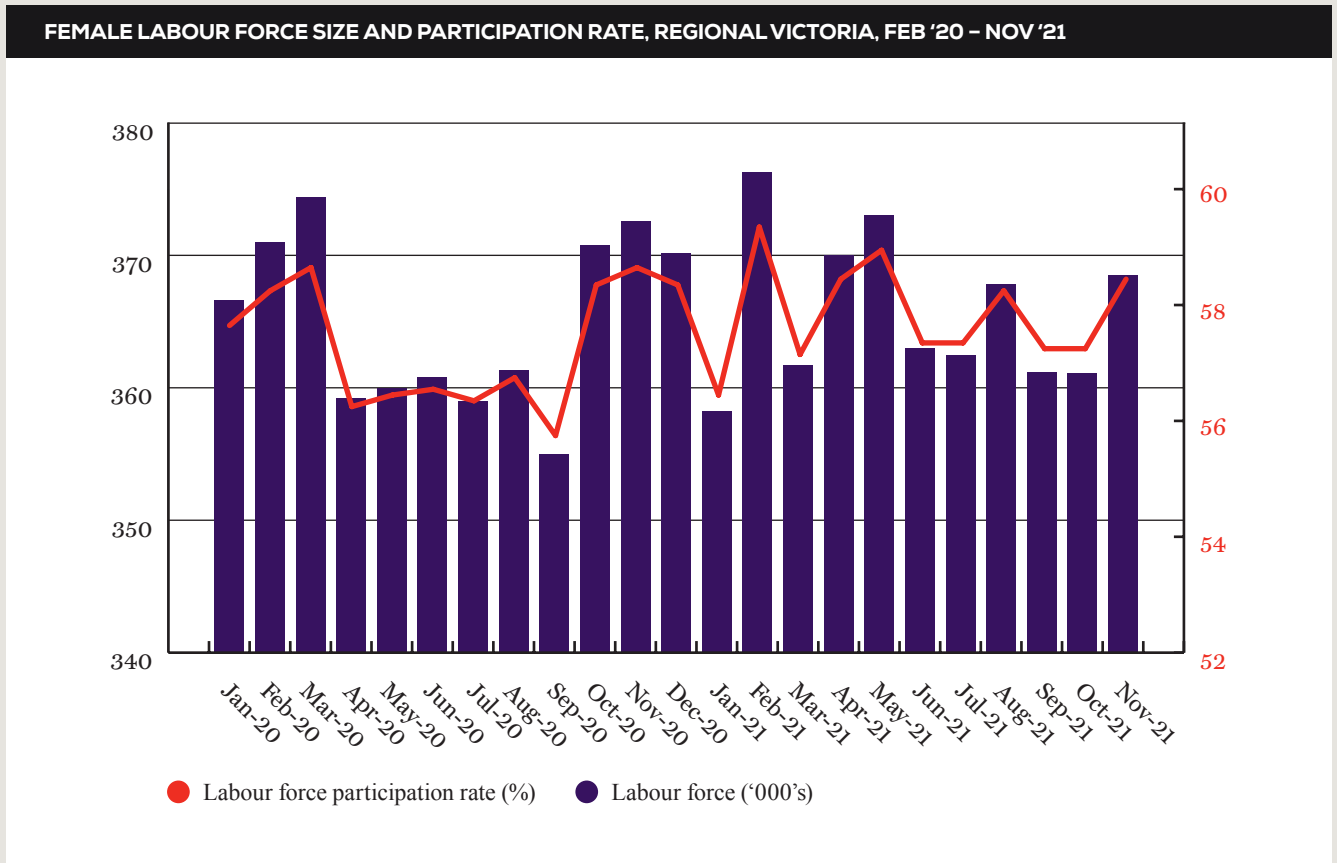
Source: Authors' calculations of data from ABS (2021)

FIGURE 2.10



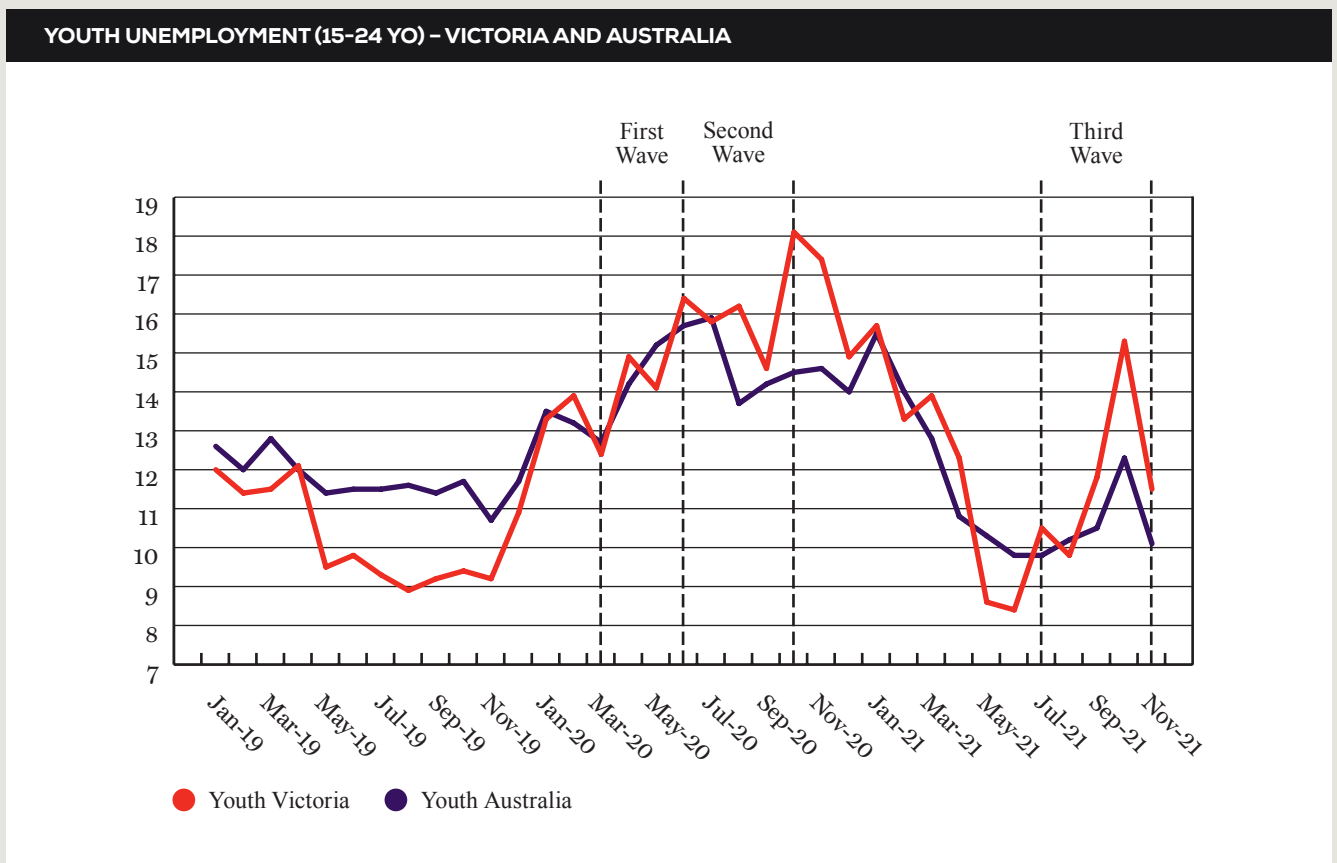
Source: Authors' calculations of data from ABS (2021)

FIGURE 2.11



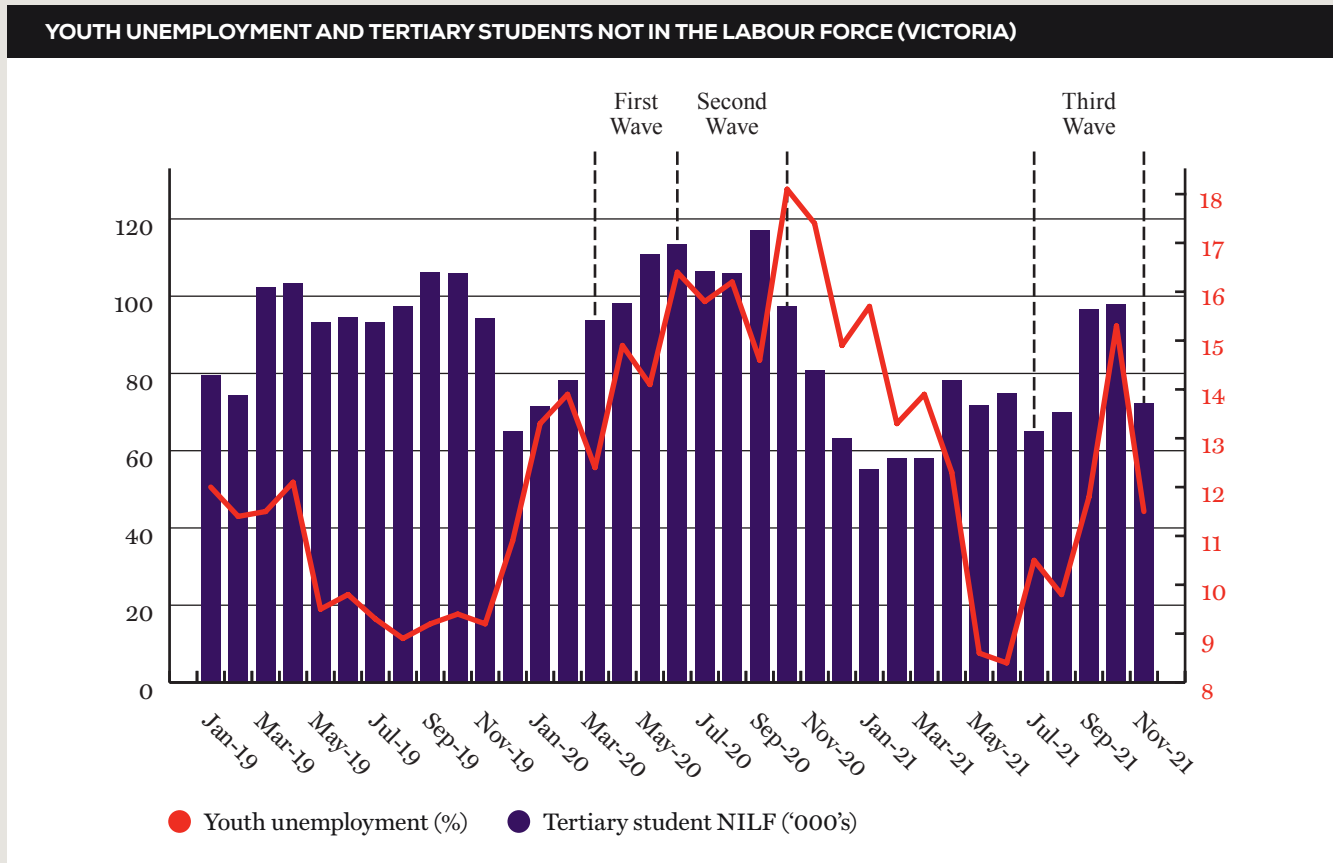
Source: Authors' calculations of data from ABS (2021)

FIGURE 2.12



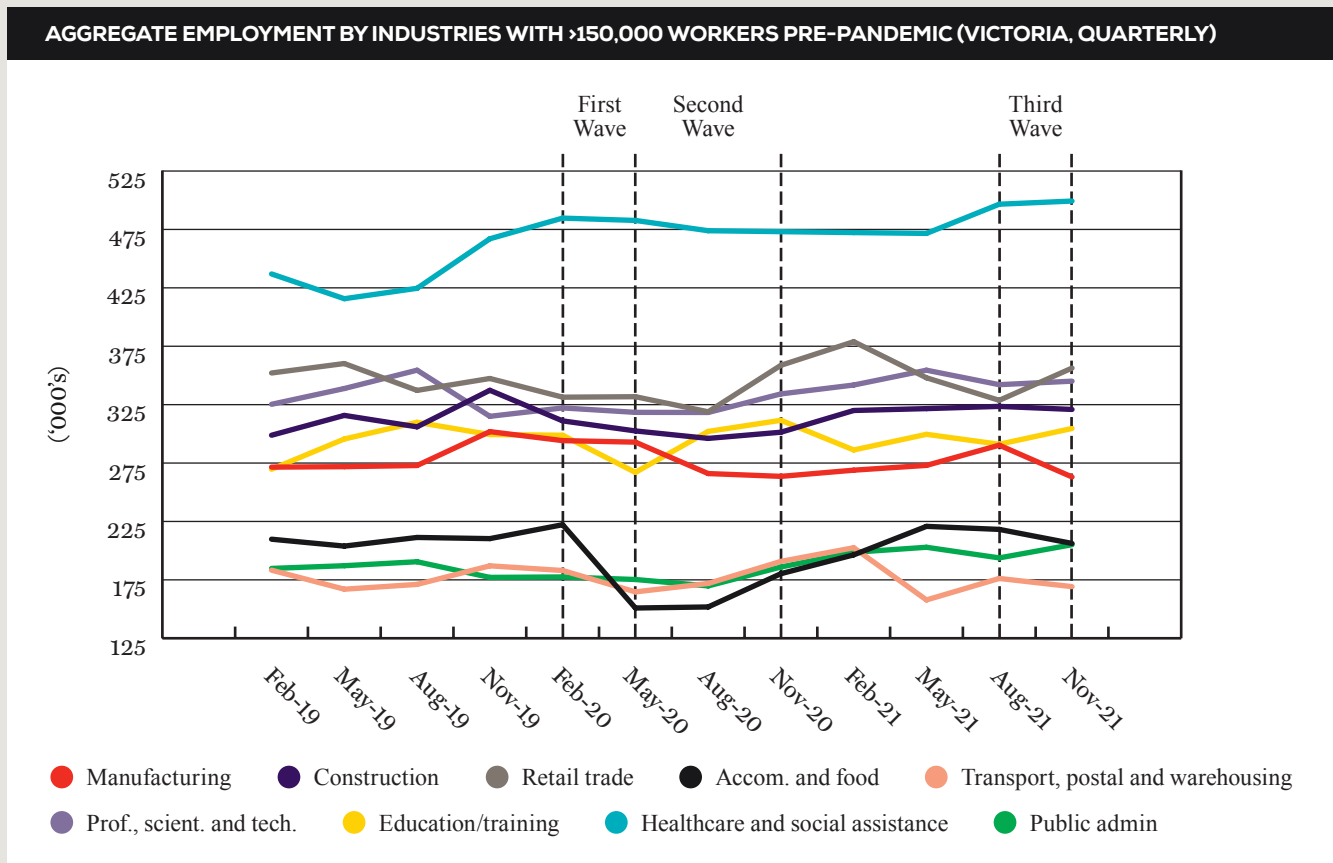
Source: Authors' calculations of data from ABS (2021)

FIGURE 2.13



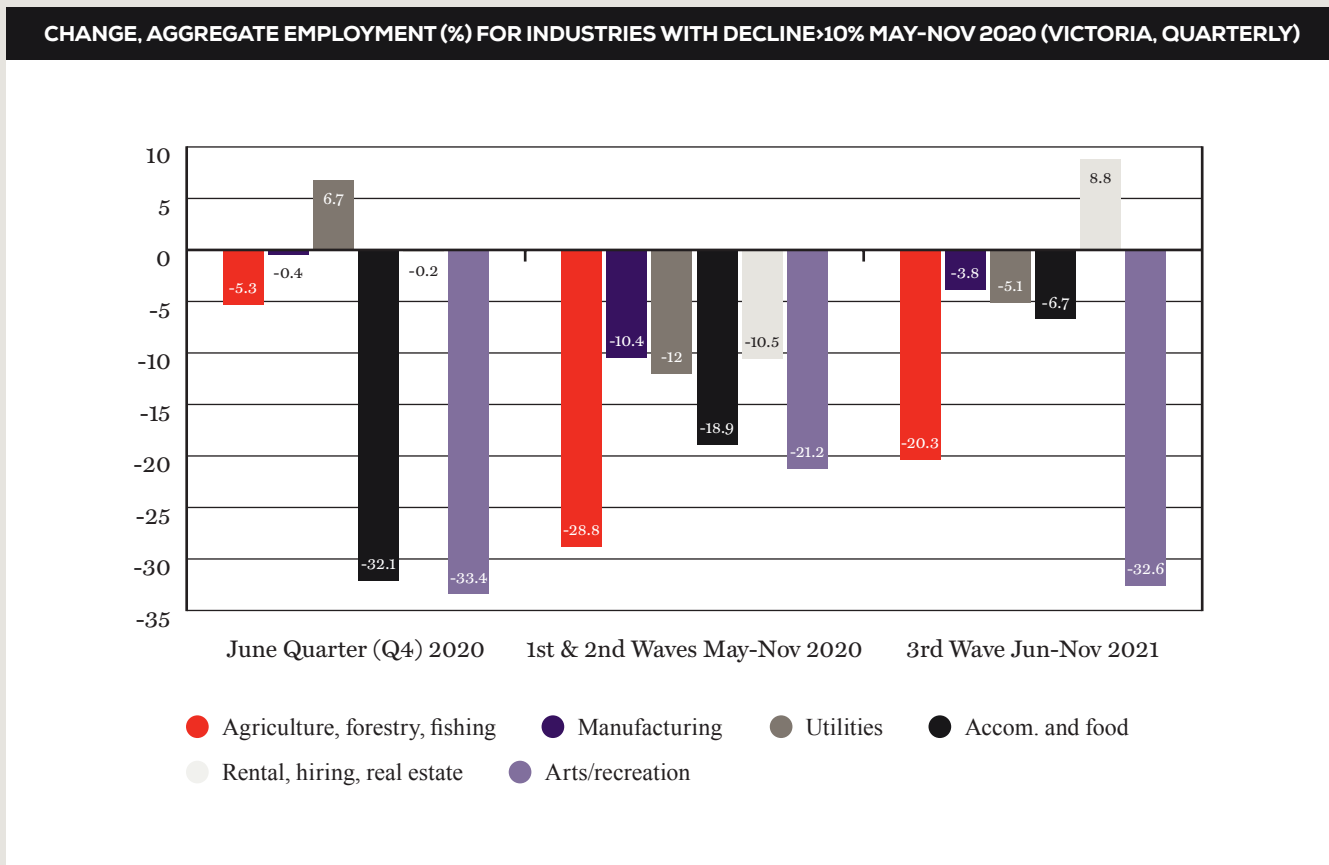
Source: Authors' calculations of data from ABS (2021)

FIGURE 2.14



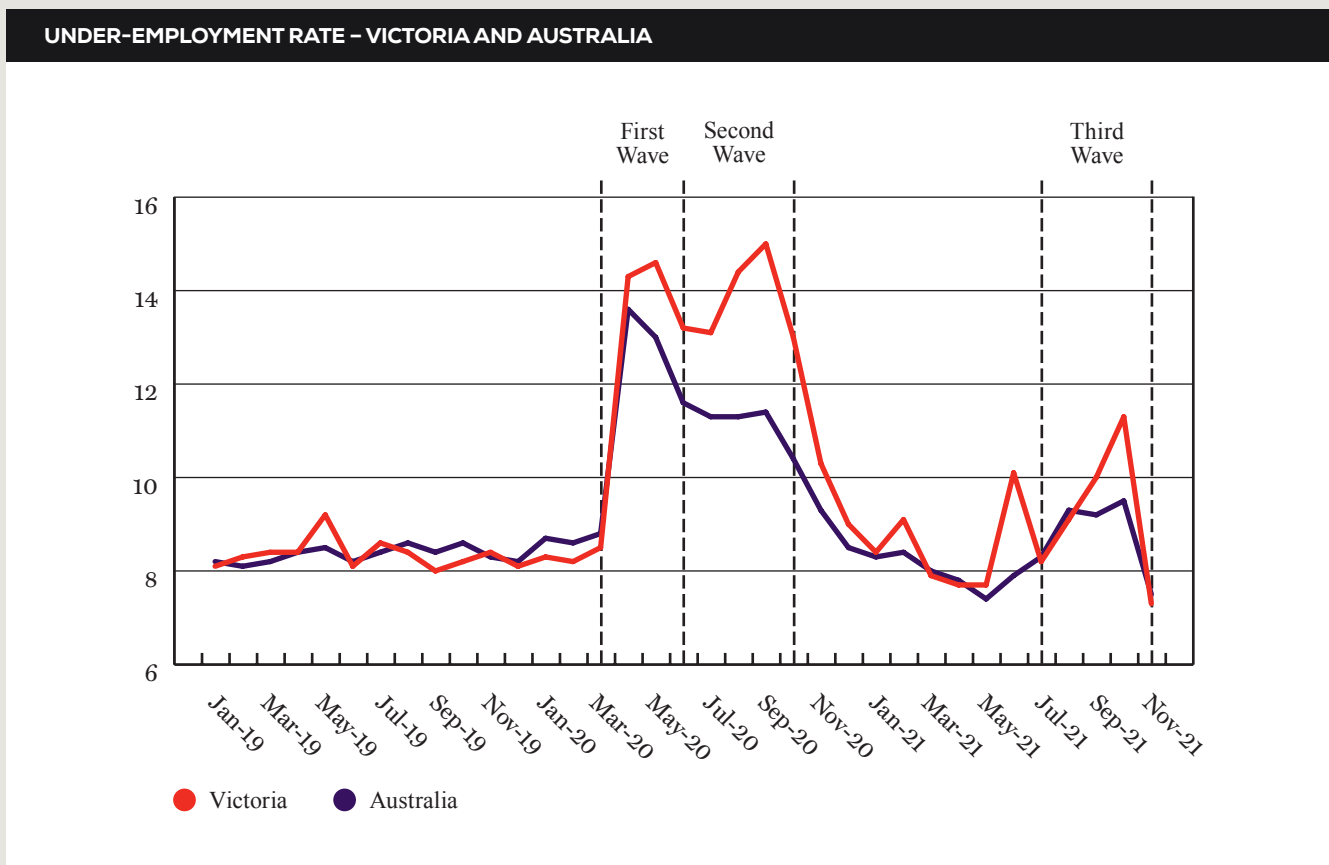
Source: Authors' calculations of data from ABS (2021)

FIGURE 2.15



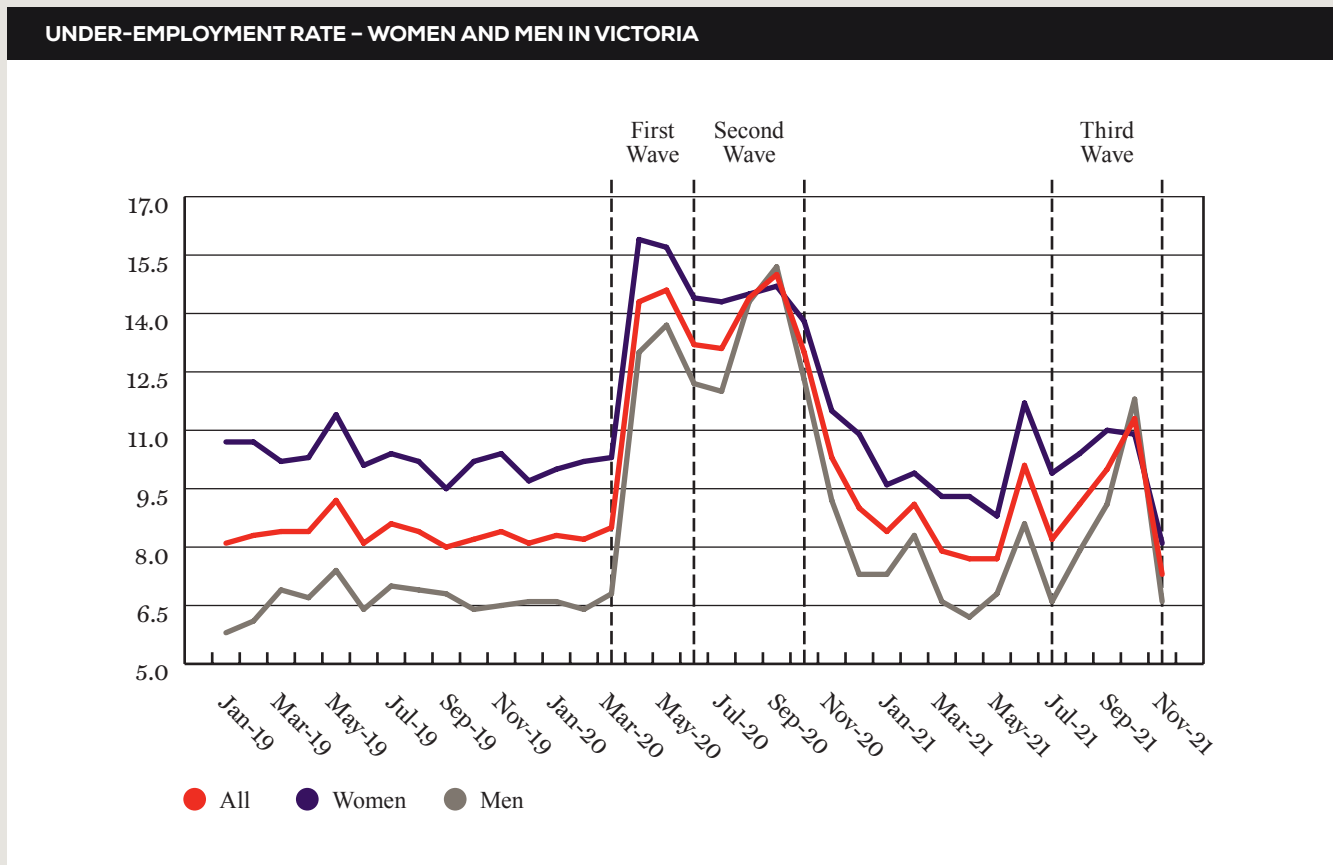
Source: Authors' calculations of data from ABS (2021)

FIGURE 2.16



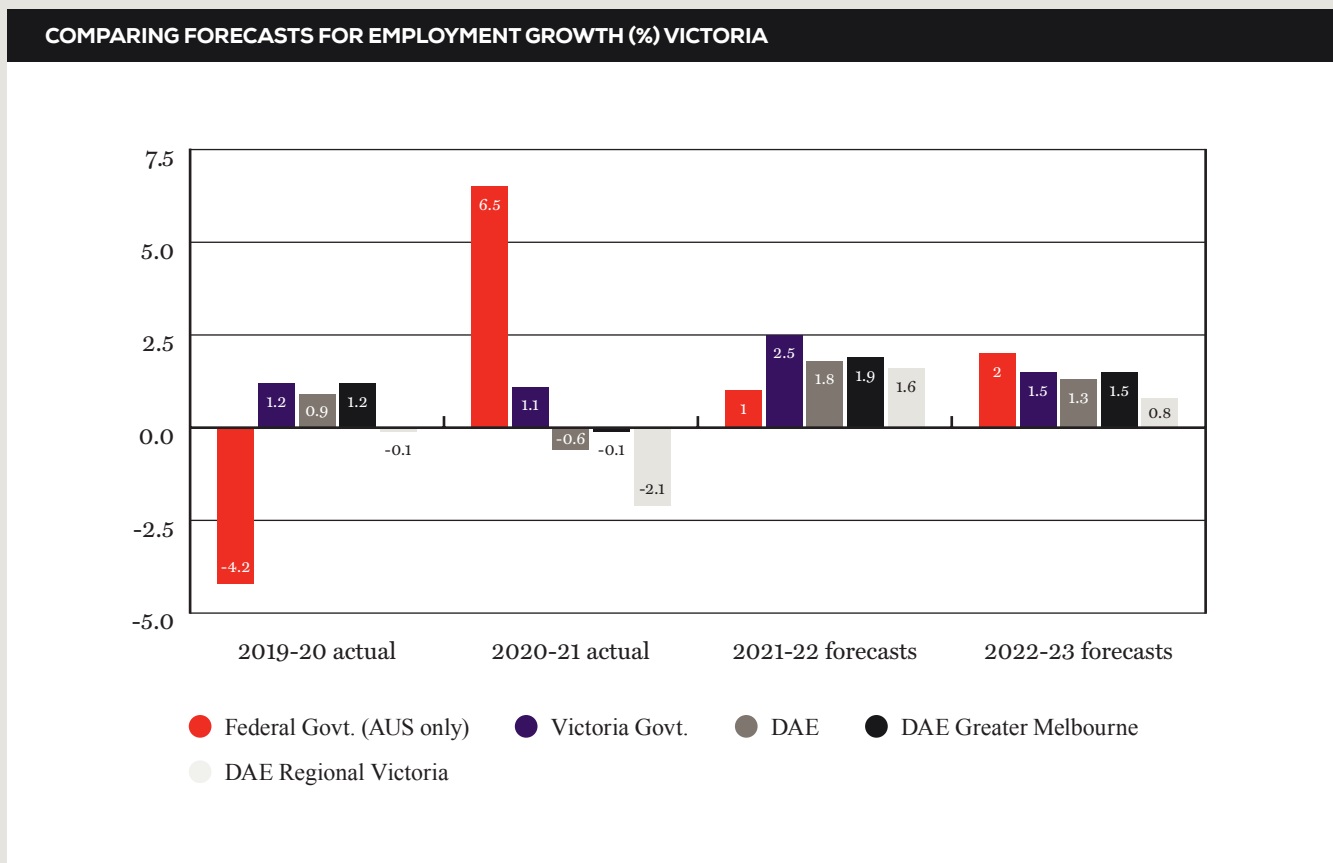
Source: Authors' calculations of data from ABS (2021)

FIGURE 2.17



Source: Authors' calculations of data from ABS (2021)

FIGURE 2.18



Source: Authors' calculations from Australian Government (2021), Victorian Government (2020) and DAE data

FIGURE 2.19

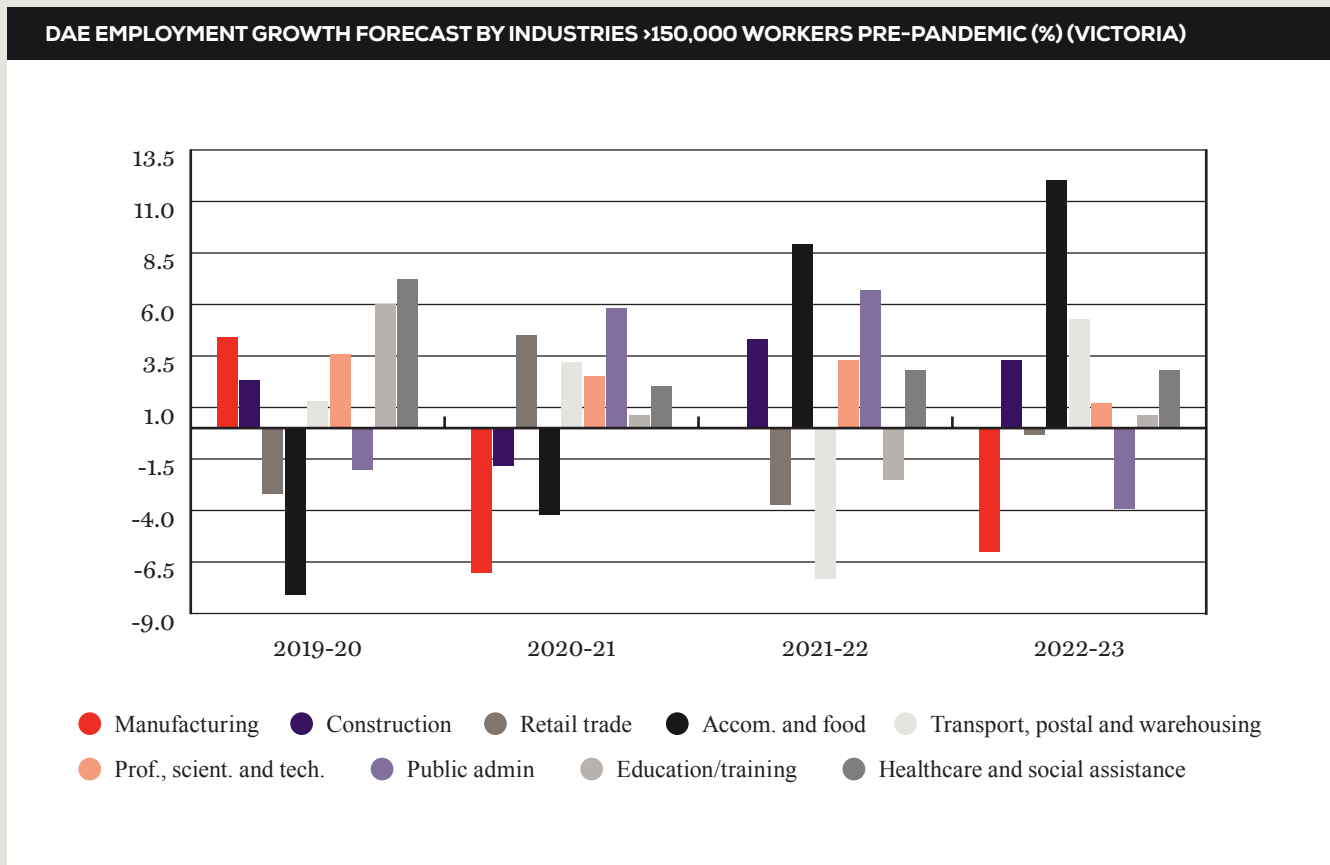


FIGURE 2.20

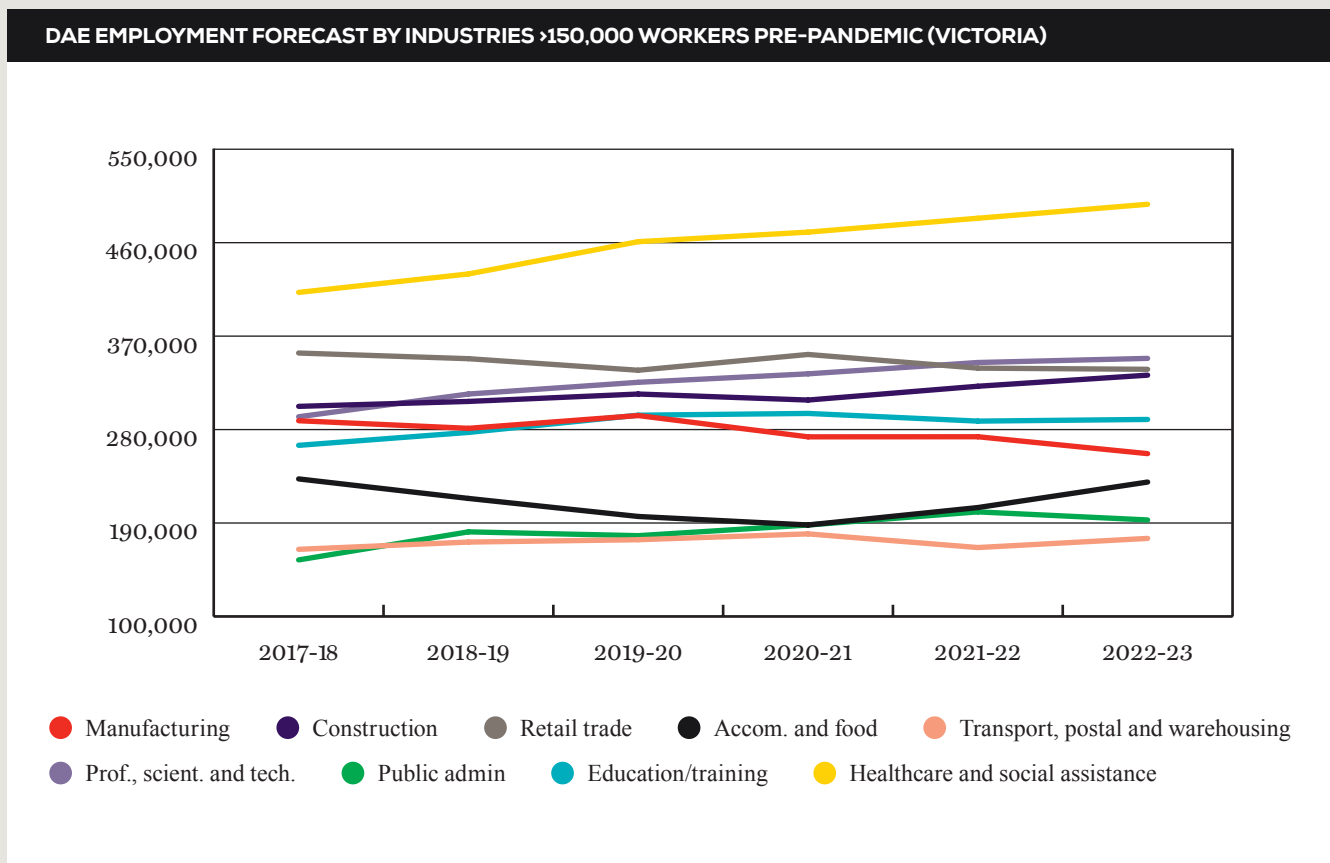


FIGURE 2.21

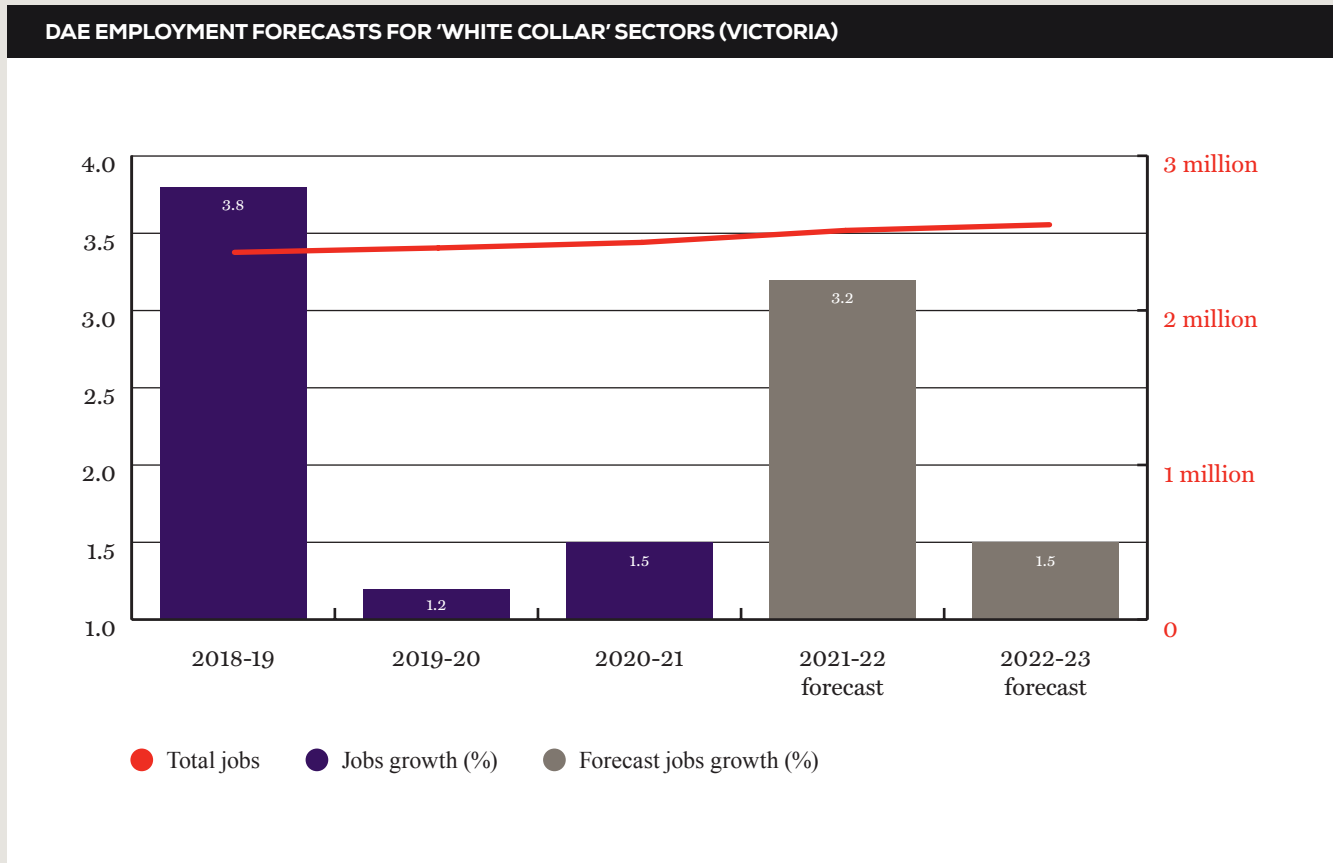


FIGURE 2.22

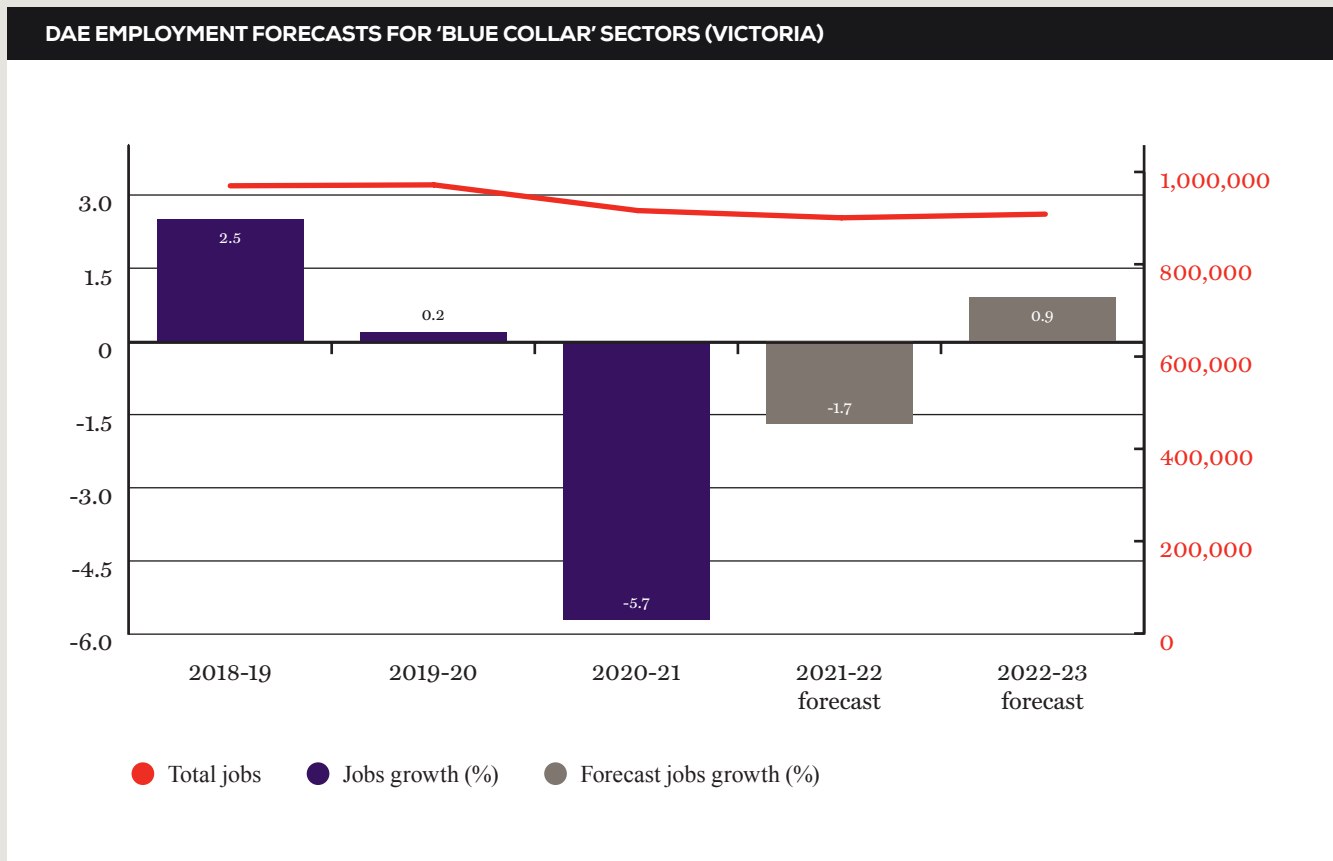


FIGURE 2.23

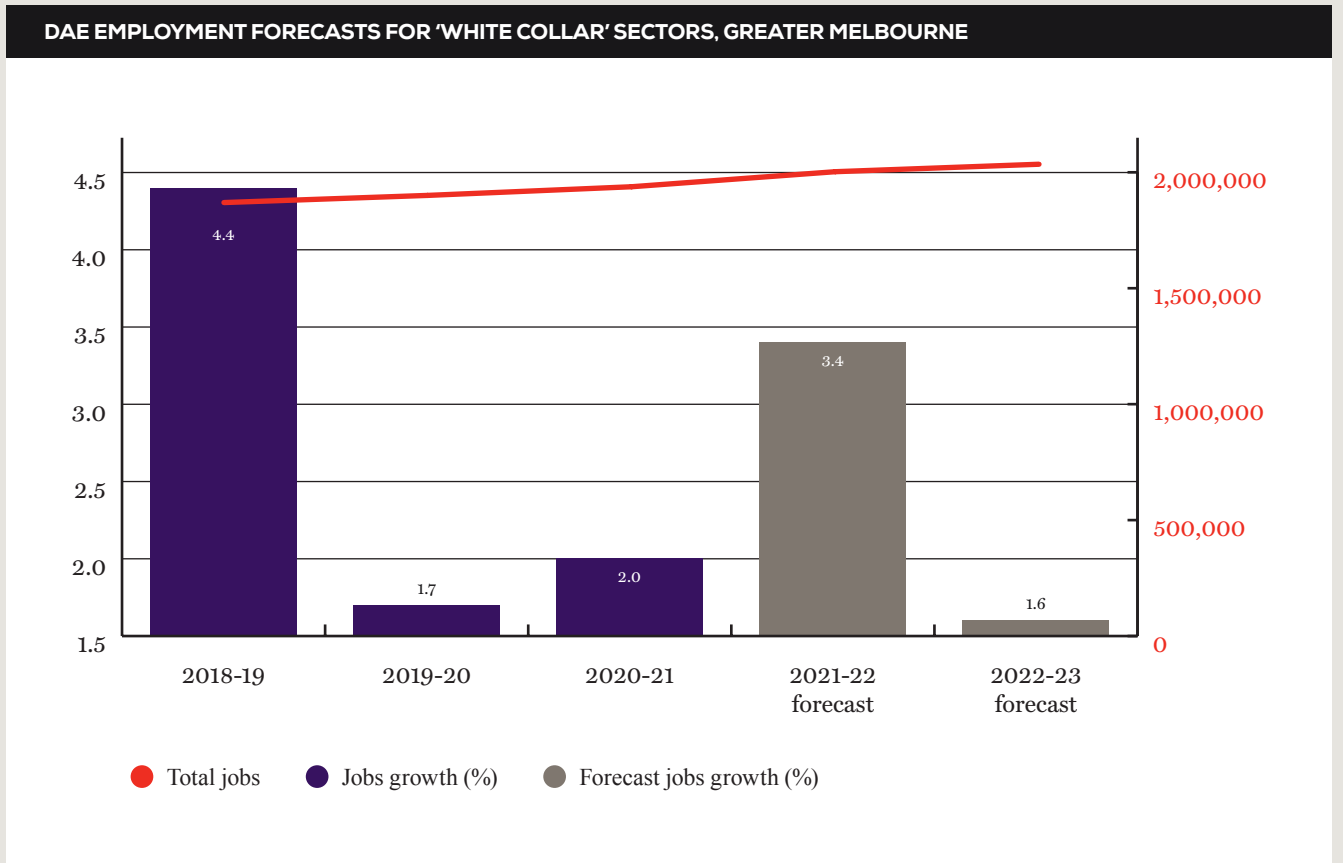
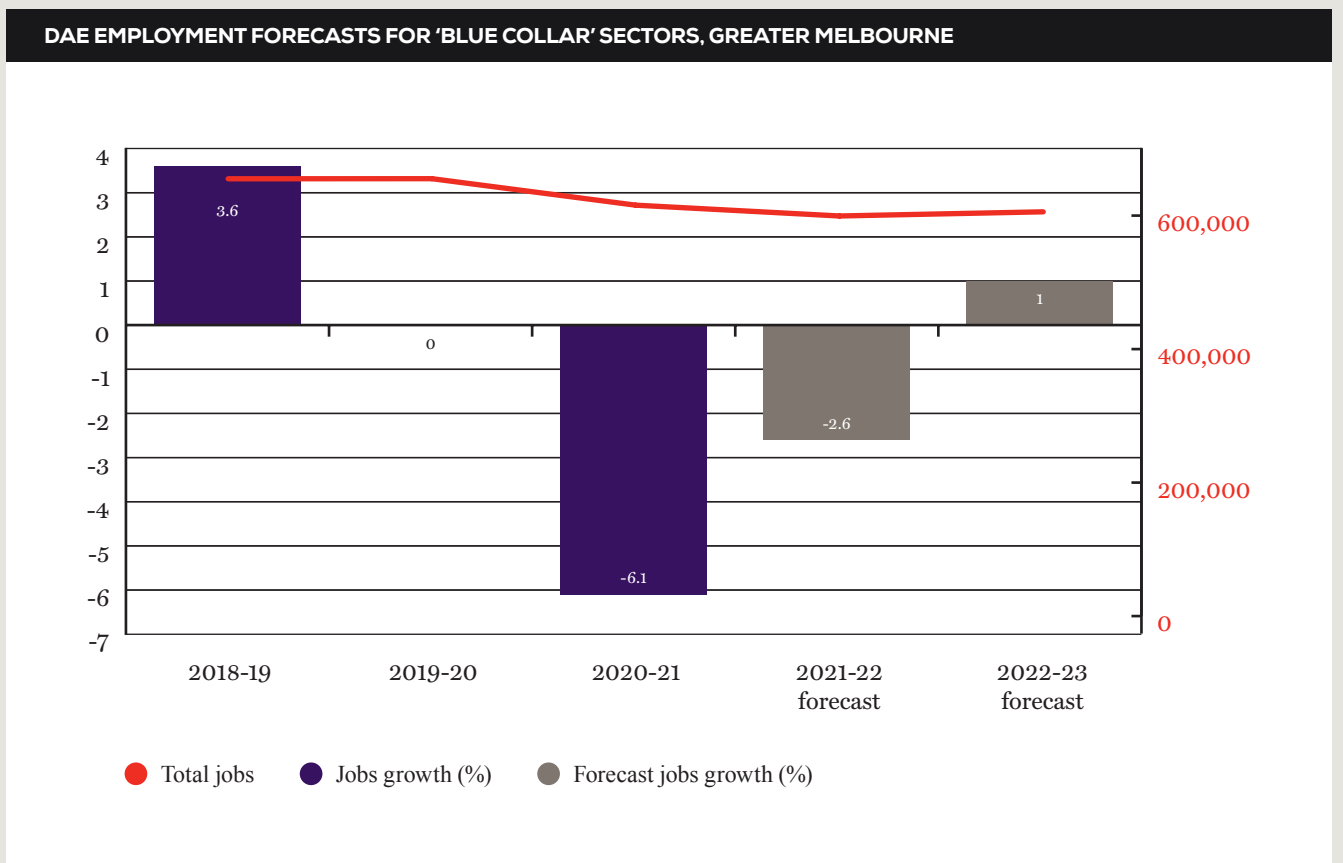


FIGURE 2.24



3. A Stunted Recovery: Why jobseekers experiencing the most disadvantages are still worse-off

A key plotline in the story of COVID-19 in Australia was the Federal Government's decision to alleviate working poverty during the depths of the crisis in 2020, only to return to the terrible inadequacies of pre-COVID welfare policy by 2021. JobSeeker is the primary case in point. From 1991 until early 2020, Australia's main unemployment benefit was the Newstart Allowance. Prior to the COVID crisis, the Newstart rate was \$559 per fortnight for single people without children.

In 2018, research found that, while average weekly earnings had increased in real terms, Newstart had not risen in line with national living standards over the preceding 25 years (DAE, 2018). Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, the Newstart rate for single people had fallen in relative terms from around 90 percent of the Age Pension to around 60 per cent (BCA, 2020: 20). From 20 March 2020, the Newstart Allowance was renamed the JobSeeker Payment. The fortnightly rate for single people with no children was set at \$565.70 per fortnight.

From 27 April 2021, JobSeeker was augmented by the Coronavirus Supplement. Initially the supplement was \$550 per fortnight, which effectively doubled the JobSeeker Payment. Research has found that most JobSeeker recipients used additional income from the Coronavirus Supplement to meet basic needs and improve household financial security. This had the effect of *improving* labour market participation as well as quality-of-life (Klein et al., 2021). According to the Australian Community Sector Survey in July 2020, 81 percent of social service providers reported a positive impact from the Coronavirus Supplement on clients and communities; the corresponding figure for JobKeeper was 83 percent (Cortis and Blaxland, 2020).

From 25 September-21 December 2020, the Supplement was reduced to \$250 per fortnight. It was then paid at a rate of \$150 per fortnight from 1 January-31 March 2021, at which point the policy ended. The decision to end these schemes, including the decision to return JobSeeker to a rate barely above the pre-crisis level, was a source of dismay among social service providers (Lourensz, 2021).

Similar changes occurred for JobSeeker mutual obligation requirements and for other payment categories. Mutual obligations for JobSeeker were suspended in March 2020. However, from 4 August 2020, these requirements were gradually reintroduced. Initially, JobSeeker recipients were required to accept any suitable work and undertake four job searches per month (DESE, 2021). From July 2021, the job seeking requirement was increased to 20 job searches per month (DESE, 2021). However, mutual obligations suspensions were periodically reactivated in areas subject to more recent COVID-19 lockdowns.

For Youth Allowance, which provides income support for people aged between 16 and 21 years that are looking for work or undertaking approved activities, there were similar shifts over time. The current Youth Allowance rate for recipients under the age of 18 with no dependent children is \$253.90 (at home rate) and an independent rate of \$462.50 (away from home). For recipients over the age of 18, the rate is \$304.60 (at home) and \$425.50 (away from home). For eligible recipients, the Coronavirus Supplement increased these rates to \$303.20 (under the age of 18 with no dependent children and at home) and \$512.50 (away from home). For recipients over the age of 18, the rate was \$354.60 (at home) and \$512.50 (away from home). Throughout the COVID-19 lockdowns of 2020-2021, mutual obligation requirements for Youth Allowance recipients looking for work were suspended.

During the Third Wave, the replacement of the 2020 emergency reforms such as JobKeeper and the Coronavirus Supplement with significantly less-comprehensive policies, such as COVID Disaster Payments, was inadequate, particularly in terms of redressing disadvantages faced by those experiencing the most vulnerability. COVID Disaster Payments excluded people already receiving government assistance. This situation was aptly described by ACOSS:

We... have a two-class income support response, with some who lost paid work because of lockdowns getting a \$600 per week Covid Disaster Payment because they were not getting any social security before the lockdown, and others getting half as much at \$315 per week [for the maximum rate of JobSeeker] (ACOSS, 2021a).

Even this inadequate policy was eventually withdrawn as the Third Wave's impact subsided in late 2021.

HOW MANY PEOPLE HAVE RECEIVED JOBSEEKER IN VICTORIA?

In concert with rising unemployment during the COVID recession, the number of Australian citizens and permanent residents on the re-badged JobSeeker scheme virtually doubled from under 730,000 in December 2019 prior to the pandemic to a peak of over 1.4 million in June 2020 after the First Wave. In Victoria over the same period, the number of JobSeeker recipients more than doubled from around 162,500 to over 350,000 before peaking in September 2020, during the Second Wave, at over 366,000.

Critically, the number of people receiving key categories of welfare payment declined after the end of the Second Wave *but not to pre-pandemic levels*. Despite the much-vaunted ‘turbo recovery’ of economic activity and employment, despite unemployment dropping below pre-pandemic levels and despite the withdrawal of the Coronavirus Supplement in March 2021, the number of people in Australia receiving JobSeeker remained above one million by June 2021, or over 270,000 (38 percent) more than in December 2019. In Victoria, the number of JobSeeker recipients in June 2021 was nearly 82,000 more than in December 2019, or 50 percent higher.

The Third Wave had a similar impact. While welfare transfer numbers declined over time, the number of JobSeeker recipients was much higher by late 2021 than prior to the pandemic. By September 2021, there were nearly 171,000 more people on JobSeeker nationwide (23 percent higher) than in December 2019. For Victoria, there were nearly 70,000 additional recipients—42 percent higher—if we compare the same time periods (Figure 3.1). The number of people claiming Youth Allowance, both nationally and in Victoria, also increased rapidly during the first phase of the pandemic and remained well above pre-pandemic levels due to the impact of the Third Wave (Figure 3.2).

Over the course of the pandemic, the number of welfare recipients in Victoria has also tended to rise as a proportion of the national total. While the proportion of Youth Allowance (Student or Apprentice) recipients did not change significantly over time, the proportion of Youth Allowance (Other) recipients rose from 17.5 percent in March 2020 to a peak of 21.1 percent in September 2020. The proportion of JobSeeker recipients rose from 22.4 to 26.2 percent over the same period. After declining briefly, figures for both JobSeeker and Youth Allowance (Other) recipients increased again significantly during the Third Wave (Figure 3.3).

A further sign of continuing problems after the Second Wave was the trajectory of JobSeeker payments based upon recipients’ age. While the number of recipients of all ages rose sharply with the onset of the First Wave, the number of claimants was most striking for people in their late 20s and early 30s. Prior to the pandemic, recipients of unemployment benefits were much more likely to be older workers aged 45 or more. With the onset of the COVID recession, workers in the 25-34 age group moved from being the second-smallest group of recipients in Victoria to the largest group. The number of claimants in this category rose astonishingly quickly, more than tripling from less than 32,500 in December 2019 to over 100,000 in September 2020 (Figure 3.4).

The shifting age composition of JobSeeker recipients is shown in percentage terms in Figure 3.5. While a smaller group overall, the number of recipients in the youngest group (21-24) also more than tripled over the same period.

Even after months of apparent economic recovery, the number of young workers on JobSeeker remain well above pre-pandemic levels. For example, there were 71 percent more workers in the 25-34 age group on JobSeeker in June 2021 than in December 2019. A lasting impact of the crisis of 2020 was that this age cohort was now the second largest JobSeeker recipient group, a trend which continued during the Third Wave.

VICTORIA'S PERSISTENTLY HIGH JOBACTIVE CASELOAD

The number of people registered with jobactive providers is a further indication that the recovery of 2020/21 left many victims of the economic crisis in an ongoing state of vulnerability. Figure 3.6 shows that jobactive caseload numbers in Victoria increased by over 2.5 times during the First Wave and 2.8 times for Greater Melbourne. However, caseload numbers remained well above pre-pandemic levels by June 2021, long after the end of the Second Wave but before the onset of the Third Wave and the resumption of lockdowns—93 percent higher, or nearly double that of December 2019. For the same period, caseload numbers for Greater Melbourne persisted at more than double pre-pandemic levels. During the Third Wave (September 2021), caseload numbers remained at almost double pre-pandemic levels.

Similar findings emerge for some of the jobactive clients experiencing the most vulnerability. For example, while the number of female clients declined after the end of the Second Wave and the re-opening of Victoria's economy, the number of women in Greater Melbourne registered with jobactive providers in June 2021 was 94.2 percent higher, or nearly double, the pre-pandemic level of December 2019 (Figure 3.7). Earlier research has already established that women were disproportionately affected by the withdrawal of the Coronavirus Supplement, including many single parents (ACOSS, 2021).

In addition, the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients for Greater Melbourne was around two thirds (66.8 percent) higher in June 2021 compared to the pre-pandemic level while the number of people registered as refugees was 50.4 percent higher for the same period (Figure 3.7).

Prior to the pandemic, refugees represented 1 in 10 jobactive clients in Melbourne (11.1 percent). Although this percentage declined slightly during the pandemic as the jobactive system managed new demand from Australian-born workers and other migrant groups pushed into unemployment by the COVID recession, this high ongoing jobactive caseload highlights the precarious situation for refugees in the labour market.

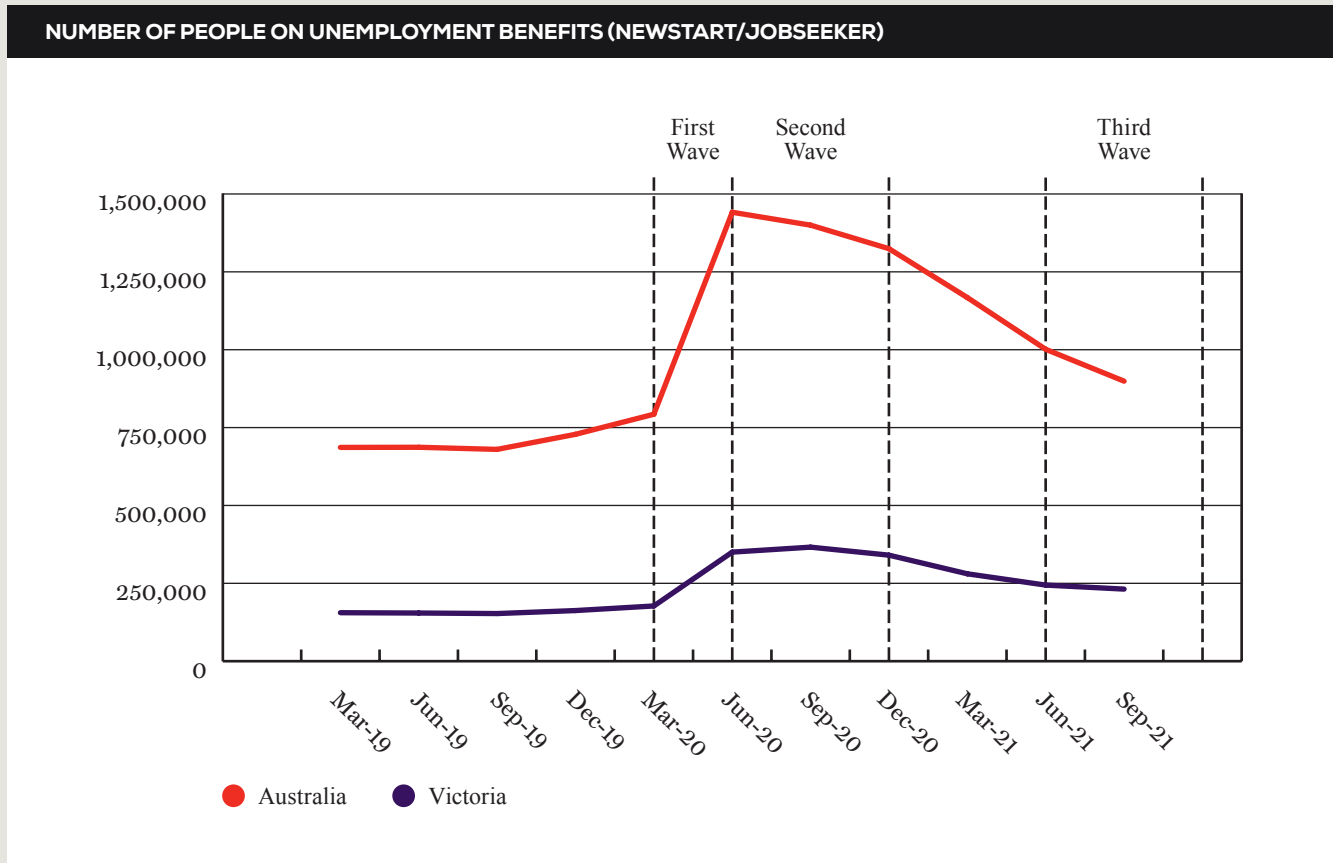
Even in regional Victoria, where the economic impact of the Second Wave was generally less profound due to less severe lockdown restrictions and lower unemployment, caseload numbers for groups experiencing vulnerability remained well above pre-pandemic levels by mid-2021. For women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and refugees, caseload numbers in June 2021 were above December 2019 numbers by 52.3, 39.8 and 12.9 percent³, respectively (Figure 3.8).

These findings highlight the lasting disruption of the COVID recession for those experiencing the most vulnerability. Even during a period of recovery when measured in terms of a declining rate of unemployment, the large minority of people experiencing marginalisation as result of the crisis was much greater than during the pre-pandemic period.

There was little 'bounce back' for people in these groups. Our evidence suggests that most were in a weaker position, when compared to the pre-pandemic period, to deal with the challenges of the Third (Delta) Wave which emerged in Victoria from July 2021 onwards and which forced millions of people and businesses back into extended lockdowns, as well as the Fourth (Omicron) Wave which emerged in December 2021.

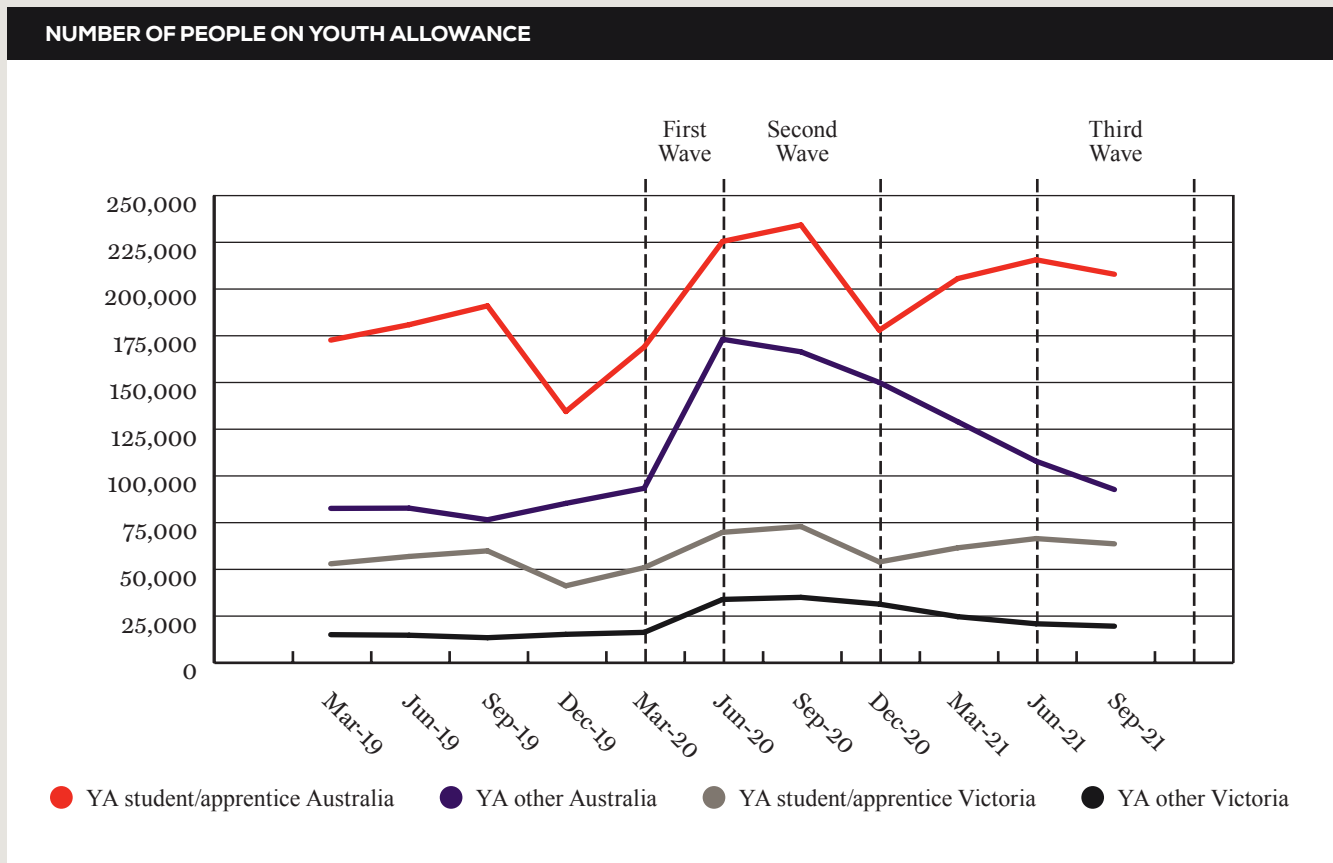
3. Refugee case numbers in jobactives across regional Victoria are generally much smaller, in proportional terms, than Greater Melbourne.

FIGURE 3.1



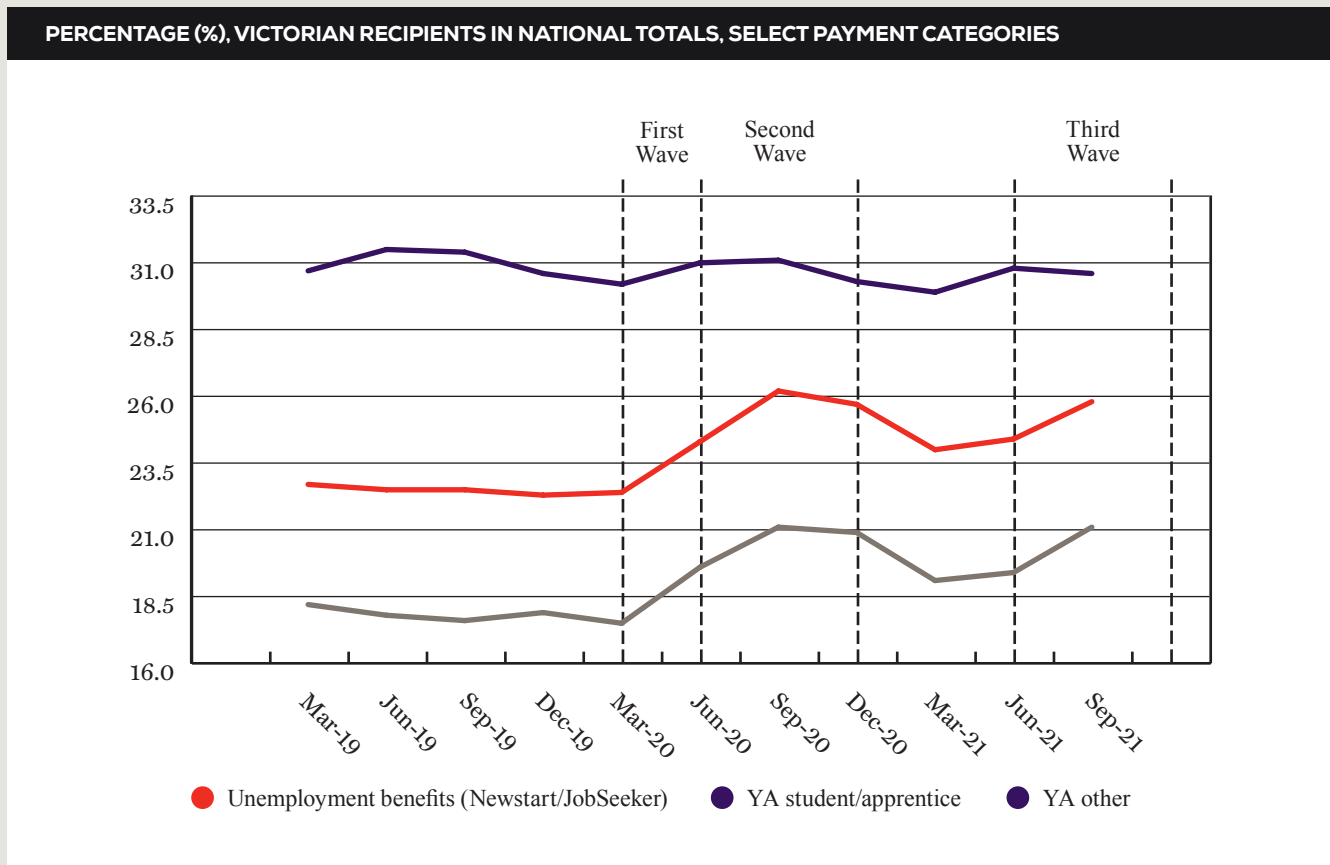
Source: Authors' calculations of data from Australian Government (2021a)

FIGURE 3.2



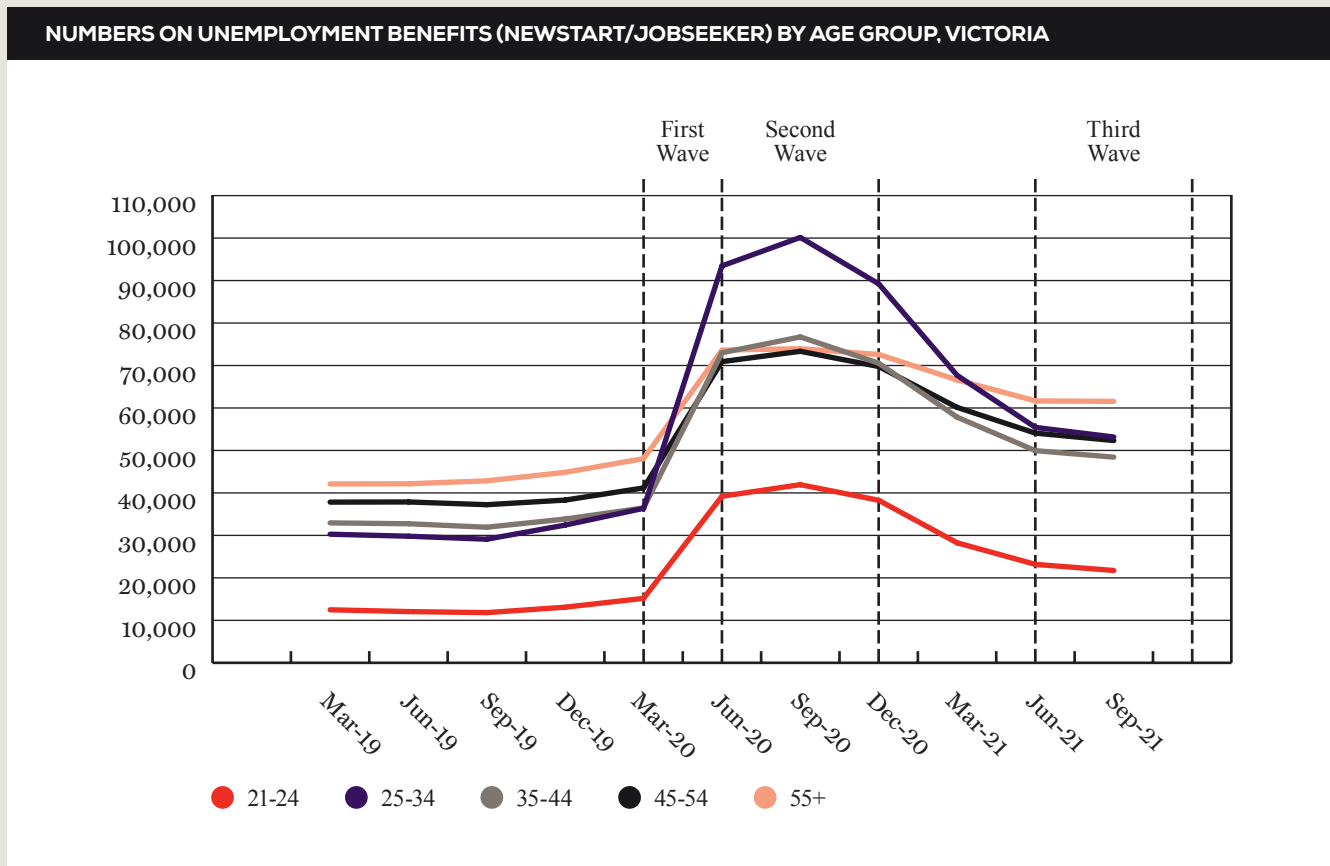
Source: Authors' calculations of data from Australian Government (2021a)

FIGURE 3.3



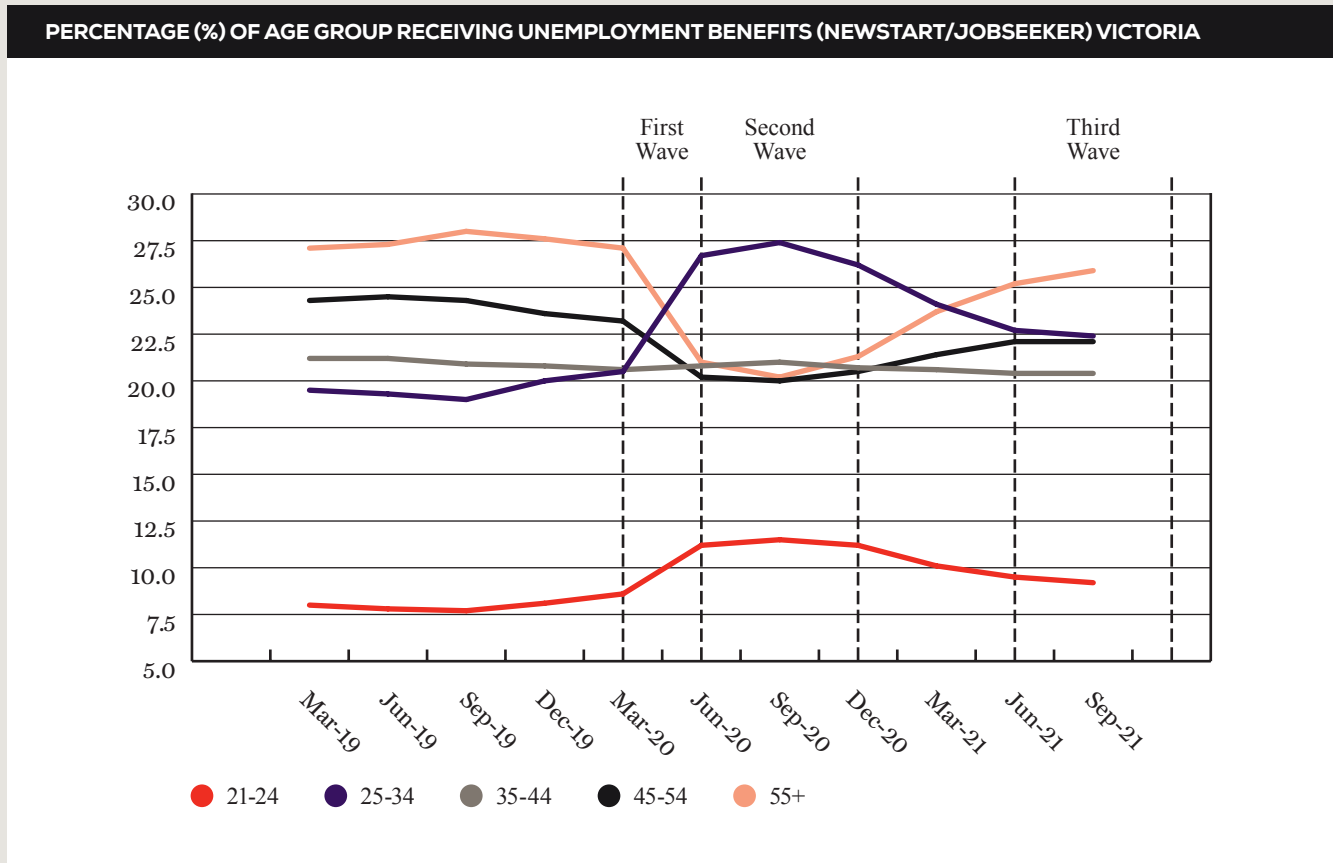
Source: Authors' calculations of data from Australian Government (2021a)

FIGURE 3.4



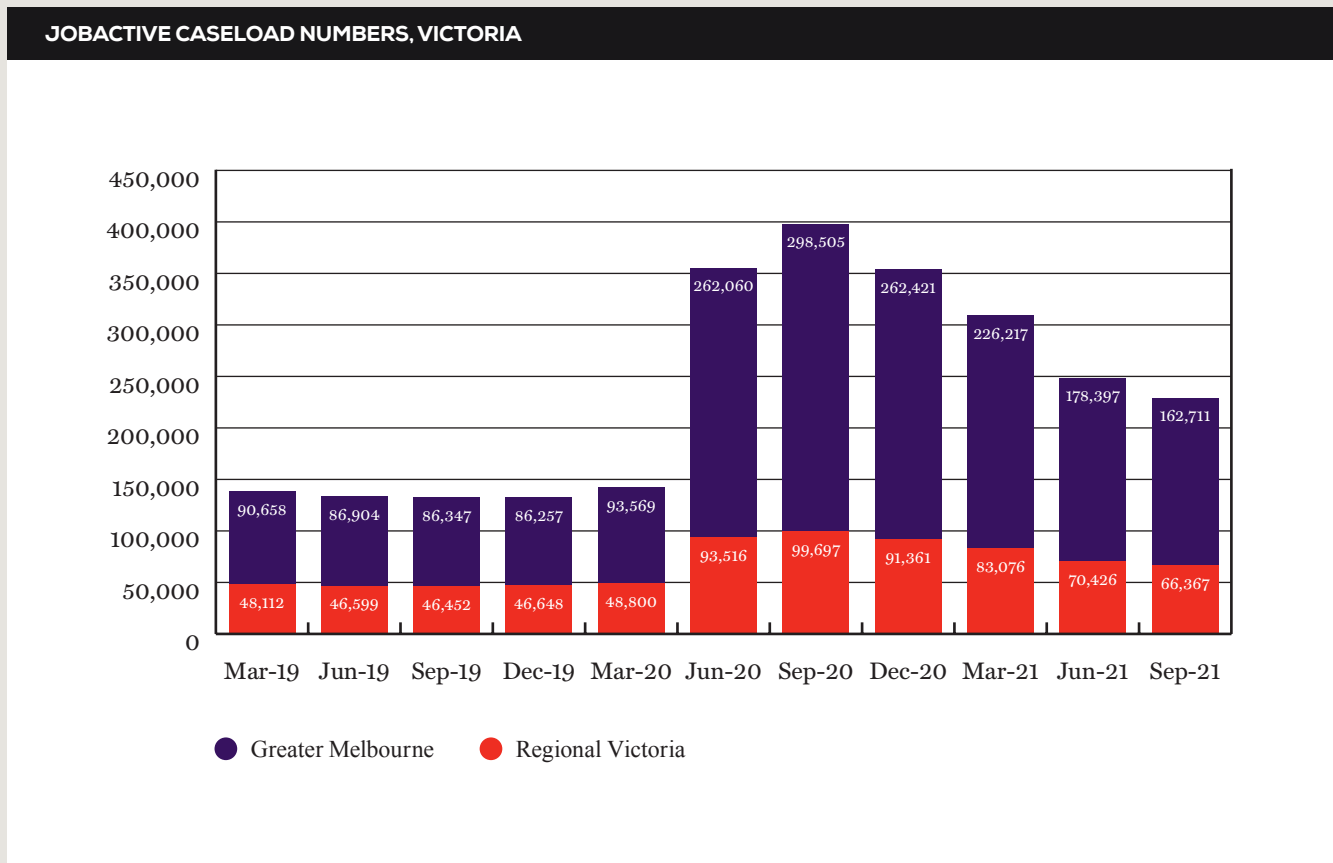
Source: Authors' calculations of data from Australian Government (2021a)

FIGURE 3.5



Source: Authors' calculations of data from Australian Government (2021a)

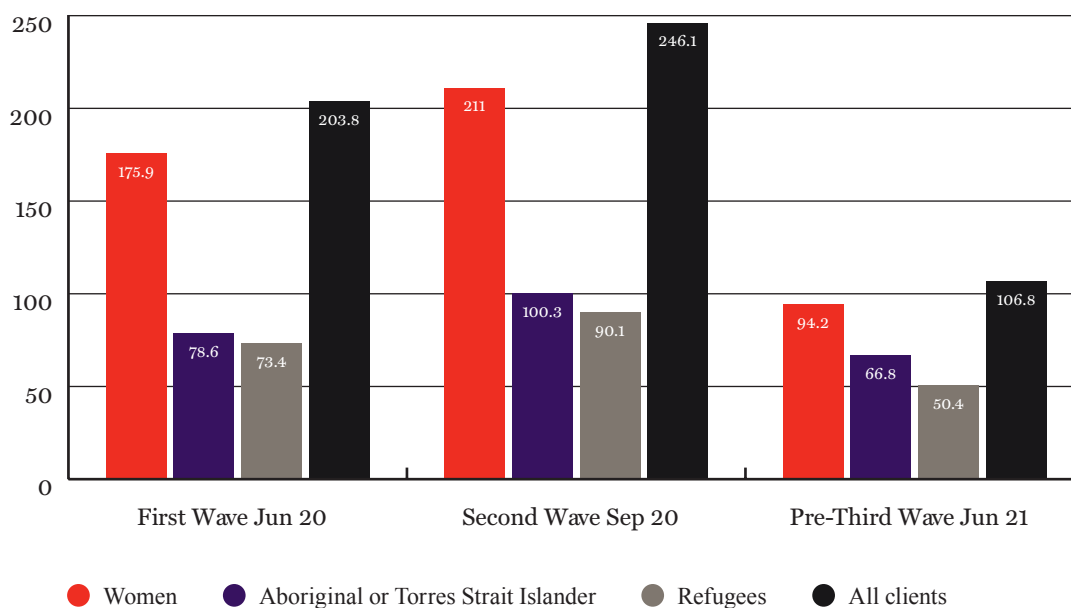
FIGURE 3.6



Source: Authors' calculations of data from Australian Government (2021a)

FIGURE 3.7

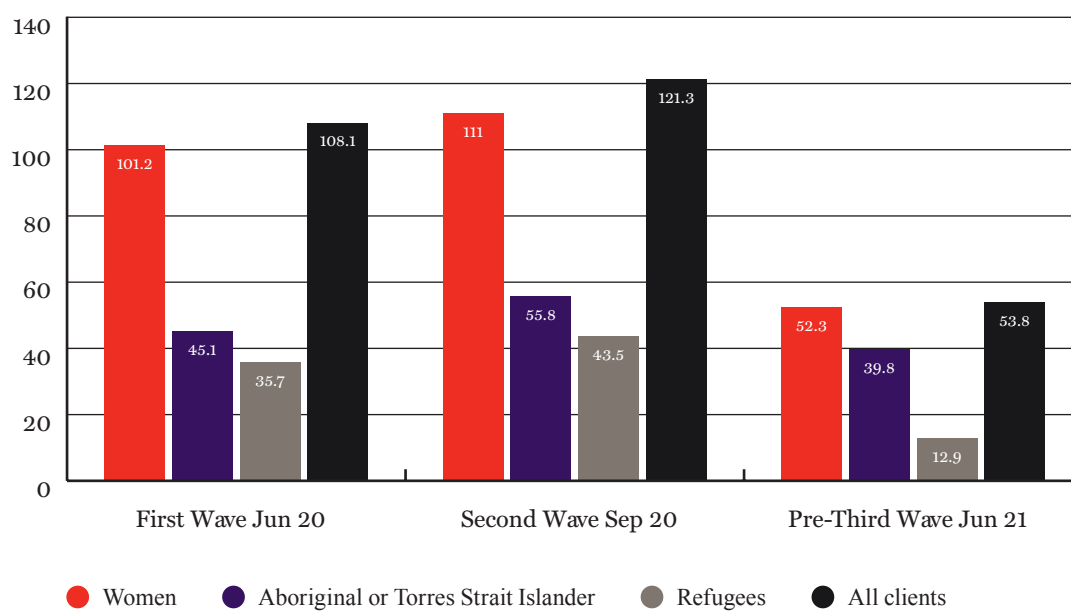
CHANGE (%), NUMBER, JOBACTIVE CLIENTS IN GREATER MELBOURNE VS. PRE-COVID PERIOD (BASE: DEC 2019)



Source: Authors' calculations of data from Australian Government (2021a)

FIGURE 3.8

CHANGE (%), NUMBER, JOBACTIVE CLIENTS IN REGIONAL VICTORIA VS. PRE-COVID PERIOD (BASE: DEC 2019)



Source: Authors' calculations of data from Australian Government (2021a)

4. The Exclusion of Victoria's Temporary Migrants During the COVID Crisis

The exclusion of millions of migrants on temporary visas from core government protections was a critical feature of the COVID recession with lasting effects (RCA, 2020; Tham, 2020). Prior to the pandemic, nearly 2.2 million people lived in Australia on temporary visas. The decision to exclude temporary visa holders had a major impact on living standards, families, social cohesion and community inclusivity (Levine et al., 2020; St Vincent de Paul, 2020).

With the exception of New Zealand citizens on Special Category Visas, temporary visa holders were excluded from the JobKeeper scheme (Sampson and Kunz, 2020). This exclusion was at odds with policies in similarly affluent nations such as Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and the UK where temporary migrants were included, albeit to different degrees, in protective policies.

Australia, by contrast, responded to the crisis by telling temporary migrants to return to their home countries. Of course, many did; but many others were left in limbo and effectively ignored by the government.

Many organisations reported that the majority of temporary migrants seeking emergency relief were on student visas (Sampson and Kunz, 2020). A survey of more than 8,000 temporary visa holders—of which 83 percent were students—found that most could not return home due to border closures, the cessation of flights or insufficient funds. Students who stayed were especially fearful of forfeiting the substantial investment made in their education by being unable to return to Australia in the future. Over half of these workers (54 percent) lost jobs during the First Wave, rising to 57 percent among students. A further 29 percent lost hours or shifts. Nearly a third (32 percent) reported not being able to meet essential needs including meals, utilities or medical care (Berg and Farbenblum, 2020).

In this survey, more than 2 in 5 participants feared becoming homeless; 1 in 7 were homeless at least once during the First and Second Waves. A third had sought emergency relief, including 37 percent of international students. Among these participants, a third sought help from an education provider or from a friend or relative in Australia, although support was not always available. The most affected jobs were concentrated in the hospitality or food and beverage sectors; for example, job loss among waiters, kitchen hands, and food servers was 67 percent. Jobs in commercial cleaning were also severely affected. Migrants from South Asia were disproportionately affected overall (Berg and Farbenblum, 2020).

As well as historically vulnerable groups such as asylum seekers and refugees, the crisis considerably affected the standard of living for new groups of migrants including recent arrivals and international students. Many members of these groups were caught in a seemingly impossible position—unable to exercise the choice of returning to their countries of origins due to international border closures or perilous public health conditions overseas, unable to access income from paid work due to lockdown measures and layoffs in sectors most dependent upon migrants, and unable to access income from public welfare transfers due to their exclusion from the JobKeeper subsidy or the JobSeeker payment.

In short, these workers were *forced into idleness in economic terms, forced into immobility in spatial terms, and forced into immiseration in financial terms*. The result of these combined forces was a sense of desperation that drove many migrant workers to seek assistance from social service providers for the first time. The proportion of temporary visa holders experiencing financial insecurity and housing

insecurity rose sharply during 2020 (Berg and Farbenblum, 2020; Sampson and Kunz, 2020).

The failure of the Federal Government to protect temporary visa holders placed additional pressure on state governments to assist those experiencing vulnerability. In Victoria, some relief was provided for around 40,000 international students under a \$45 million International Student Emergency Relief Fund, although eligibility required a co-contribution from higher education providers. Furthermore, migrants were eligible to access up to \$2,000 in circumstances of rental hardship as part of the \$80 million Coronavirus Rent Relief Grant scheme, although this required a bond having been formally lodged with Residential Tenancy Bond Authority. Eligibility was also available for \$1,500 hardship payments for COVID-positive workers in self-isolation and \$300 for those self-isolating while awaiting test results (Sampson and Kunz, 2020).

Numerous service providers reported the shift in the composition of clients during the First and Second Waves, including the rising number of international students. ACOSS' Australian Community Sector Survey in July 2020 found that over three-quarters (77 percent) of service providers had reported a change in clientele. For providers of migrant and multicultural services, this figure rose to 94 percent (Cortis and Blaxland, 2020).

In Victoria, the Federal Department of Social Security's (DSS) funded emergency relief disproportionately assisted international students. Of the 7,348 people assisted across 4,850 households to 31 July 2020, 59.2 percent were on student visas and a further 17.3 and 12.2 percent were on bridging visas and temporary graduate visas, respectively. Recipients of emergency relief and food aid

were overwhelmingly from countries in South, Central and Southeast Asia. A third of the total were from Nepal. By the end of July 2020, emergency relief was being requested over 4,500 times per week (Sampson and Kunz, 2020: 28).

At the onset of the First Wave, Victoria had the largest share of refugees and asylum seekers on temporary visas in the country—47,417 people, or 41.4 percent of the national total. Of this, three quarters (75 percent) were applicants for Permanent Protection Visas, 12.6 percent on Temporary Protection Visas or Safe Haven Enterprise Visas and the remaining 12.4 percent on Bridging Visas. A report for the Refugee Council of Australia released during the Second Wave estimated that unemployment for these visa holders would more than double from 19.3 to 41.8 percent and that median weekly wages would fall by \$90 per week, or 9.8 percent, leaving 93 percent to survive on sub-minimum wage incomes. On average, employment was forecast to drop by 30.5 percent. For accommodation and food services, where nearly 1 in 5 was employed prior to the pandemic, this decline was expected to be 60.5 percent (van Kooy, 2020).

THE JOBS CRISIS AMONG VICTORIA'S MIGRANTS

The unequal experience of the crisis is reflected in many ways, including different unemployment rates between migrants and those born in Australia. While increasing significantly during the pandemic, official unemployment for Australian-born workers in Victoria never exceeded 7 percent. Unemployment for recently arrived migrants was much higher.

For those who arrived five to nine years ago, unemployment peaked at 11.6 percent during the Second Wave. For those who arrived in Australia less than five years ago, unemployment peaked at 18.3 percent in June 2020, or nearly 3 times higher than unemployment for Australian-born workers (Figure 4.1).

Average unemployment before the pandemic and during the First and Second Waves highlights this differentiated experience. In the 12 months prior to the pandemic (April 2019–March 2020), unemployment for migrants who arrived five to nine years ago was 6.6 percent on average compared to 4.3 percent for Australian-born workers. However, unemployment for migrants arriving within the previous five years was 8.7 percent on average, or more than double the rate for Australian-born workers.

During the First Wave of the pandemic (April–May 2020), unemployment for these most recently arrived migrants ballooned to 15.5 percent and, for migrants that arrived five to nine years ago, to 9.6 percent, compared to 5.8 for Australian-born workers. During the Second Wave (June–November 2020), these rates were 14.8, 10.3 and 6.2 percent, respectively. During the Third Wave (July–October 2021), these rates were 9.0, 6.2 and 4.2 percent, respectively.

As a mark of the lasting impacts of each wave of pandemic, migrant unemployment during the Zero-COVID Hiatus (December 2020–June 2021) remained much higher than the pre-pandemic period. During this period, unemployment for migrants who arrived five to nine years ago was 7.5 percent on average (0.9 percent higher than the 12-month average to March 2020) and, for migrants who arrived within the previous five years, it was 10.2 percent (1.5 percent higher).

Thus, the gap in unemployment rates between Australian-born and migrant workers widened significantly during the pandemic (Figure 4.1).⁴ This data also reflects the concentration of recently arrived workers and temporary visa workers in jobs which were most exposed to the effects of the crisis or those most easily shed by employers. Surging migrant unemployment reflected the exclusion of these workers from the JobKeeper scheme.

To understand the scale of the crisis in Victoria, we can approximate the proportion of people in Victoria's workforce who were victims of government exclusion. Shortly before the pandemic (February 2020), a third of Victoria's 3.67 million-strong labour force was comprised of workers born overseas. Almost 1 in every 8 workers (12 percent) had arrived less than 10 years ago and almost 1 in every 18 (5.7 percent) had arrived within the last 5 years (Figure 4.2). Among workers who arrived 5–9 years ago, the largest share came from countries in South and Central Asia (29.6 percent), followed by Southeast Asia (15.9 percent) and Northeast Asia (15.5 percent) (Figure 4.3). Among those arriving within the previous five years, these regions were also dominant, with 46.5, 14.6 and 10.2 percent of the total share, respectively (Figure 4.4).

Based on these shares, Figures 4.5 and 4.6 chart changing unemployment among recent arrivals from these three regions of origin. Among migrants who arrived five to nine years ago, those from countries in Northeast Asia experienced unemployment as high as 22.3 percent during the peak of Second Wave, over 3.5 times higher than unemployment for Australian-born workers. However, unemployment among migrants from South/Central and Southeast Asia was also very high during this period. Importantly, unemployment for migrants from South/Central Asia rose to as high as 10.2 percent during the peak of the Third Wave (Figure 4.5).

Among migrants who arrived within the previous five years, those from countries in South and Central Asia experienced unemployment as high as 24 percent during the First Wave, a remarkable four times higher than official unemployment for Australian-born workers. For these workers, unemployment did not drop below 14 percent until after the Second Wave had subsided in Victoria. Workers from countries in Southeast Asia did not experience a peak in unemployment until January 2021, during a period of supposedly resurgent economic recovery (Figure 4.6).

The finding that unemployment remained relatively high for recently arrived migrants can be shown more clearly by comparing average monthly unemployment rates for key periods before, during and the after the First and Second Waves. Like the findings above, Figure 4.7 demonstrates that unemployment rose dramatically for migrant workers during the First and Second Waves, especially for workers who arrived within the previous five years but also for workers who arrived five to nine years ago. Since the end of the Second Wave, however, the percentage point 'gap' between Australian born and foreign-born workers has persisted at higher levels than prior to the pandemic.

For instance, the gap between unemployment rates among the most recent arrivals from South/Central Asia and Australian-born workers more than tripled during the First Wave, rising from 4.3 to 13.9 points. But this gap persisted at 5.4 points during the recovery period, or 1.1 points higher than during the pre-pandemic era. Similarly, unemployment among the most recent arrivals from Southeast Asia during the recovery period persisted at 7.2 points higher on average than Australian-born workers compared to 5.8 during the pre-pandemic era—an increase of 1.4 points on average.

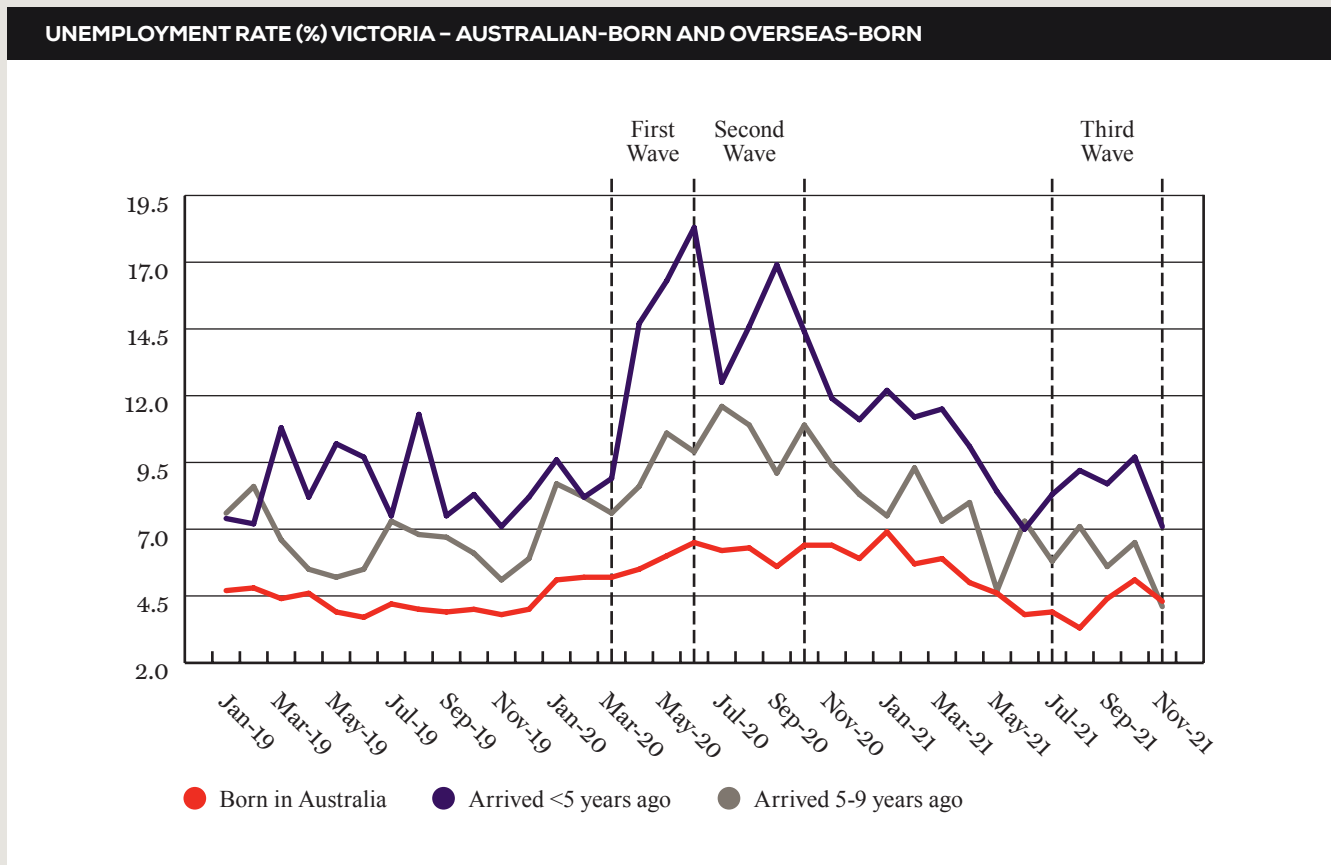
During the Third Wave, unemployment for Australian-born workers returned to pre-pandemic levels despite the fact that this trend concealed ongoing problems in aggregate employment growth and labour force participation (see Section 2 for details). In this period, unemployment among the most recent arrivals from Northeast Asia ballooned to an average of 10.9 points higher than unemployment for Australia-born workers.

Tellingly, unemployment for key migrant groups remained significantly higher on average than Australia-born workers during even the Zero COVID Hiatus. For the most recent arrivals from South/Central and Southeast Asia, the average monthly unemployment gap with Australian-born workers was 0.9 and 1.0 points higher than during the pre-pandemic period, respectively. This finding provides a window into the *lasting* disadvantages of job loss and unemployment for migrant workers during periods of supposed recovery, including the current period since the end of the Third Wave.

4. Similar data was included in a report published in 2020 by Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand (Levine et al., 2020).

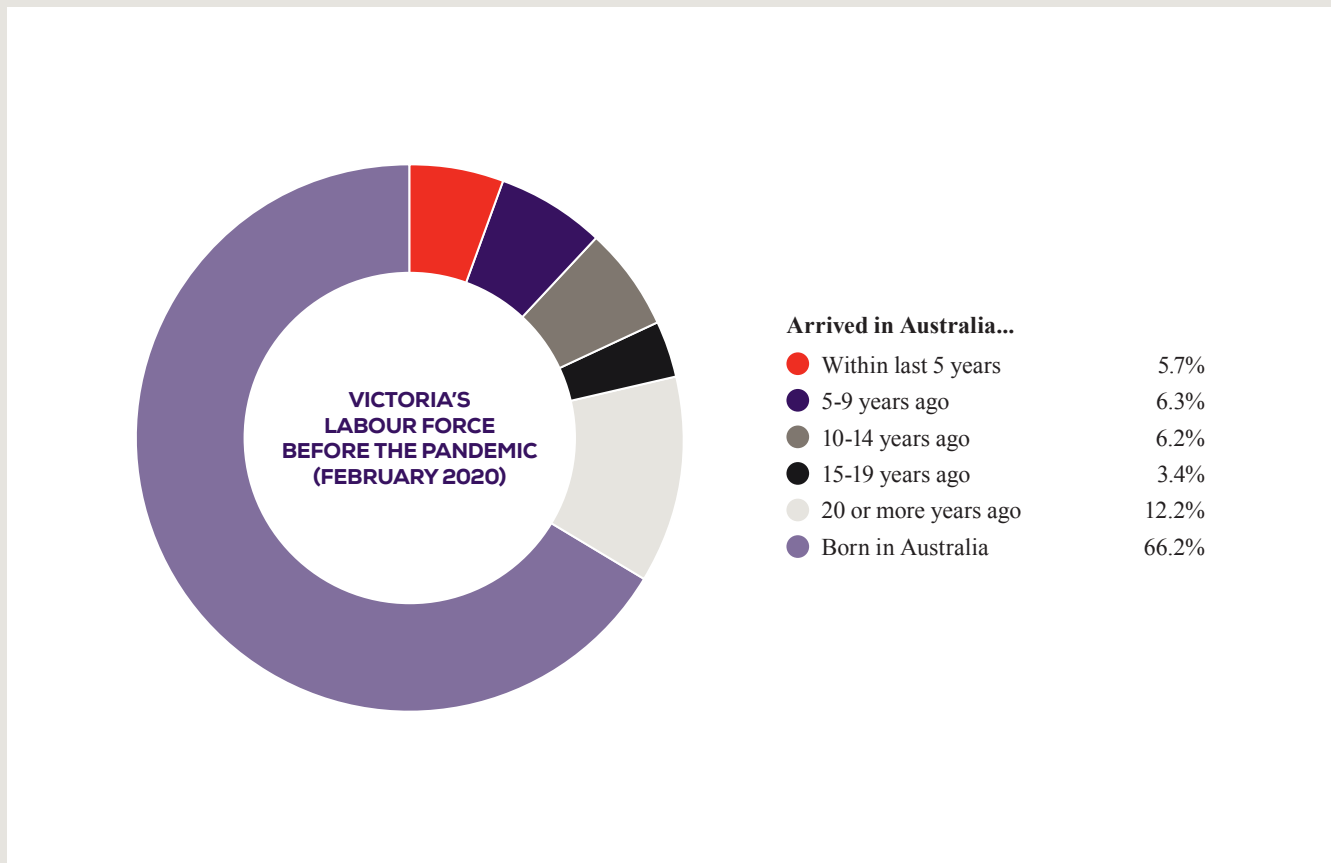


FIGURE 4.1



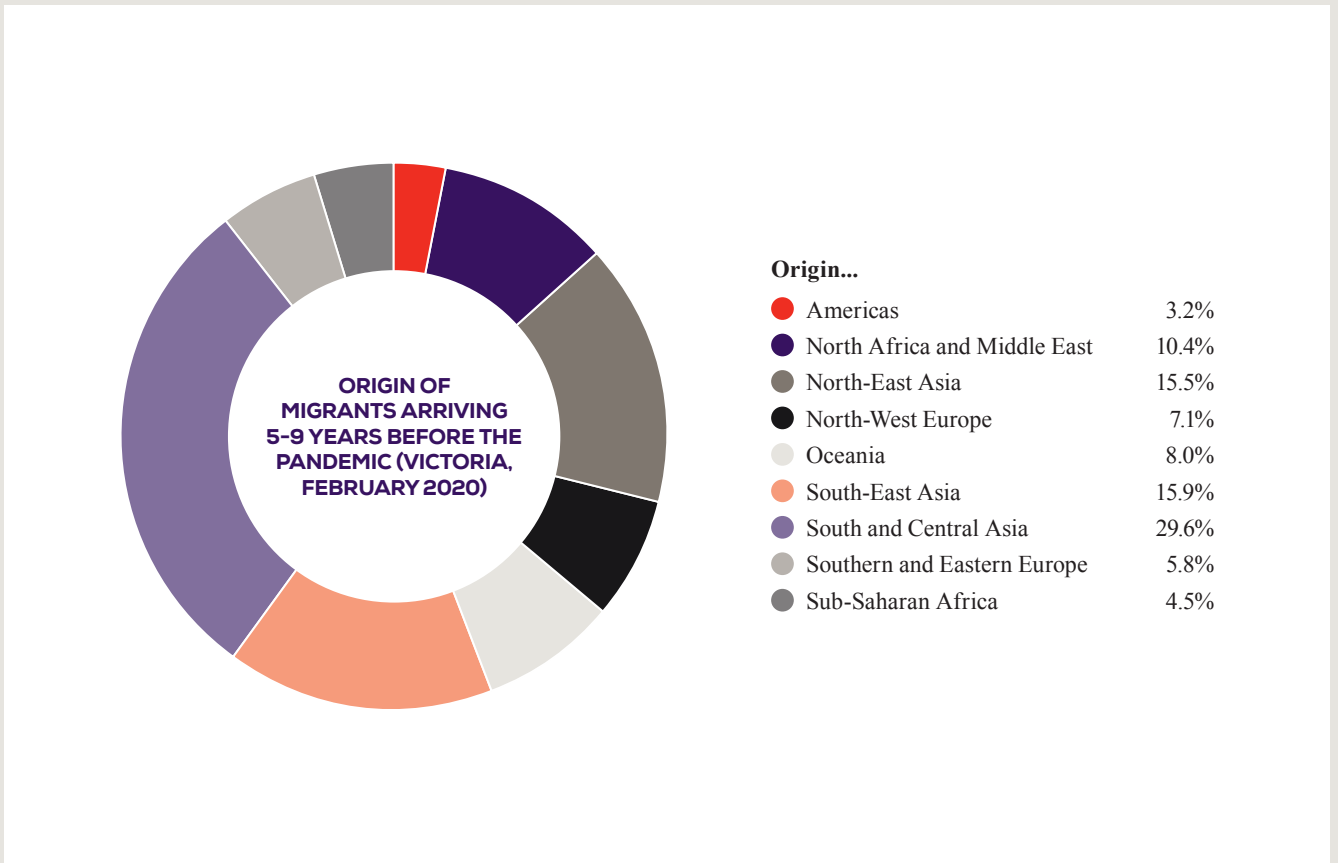
Source: Authors' calculations of data from ABS (2021)

FIGURE 4.2



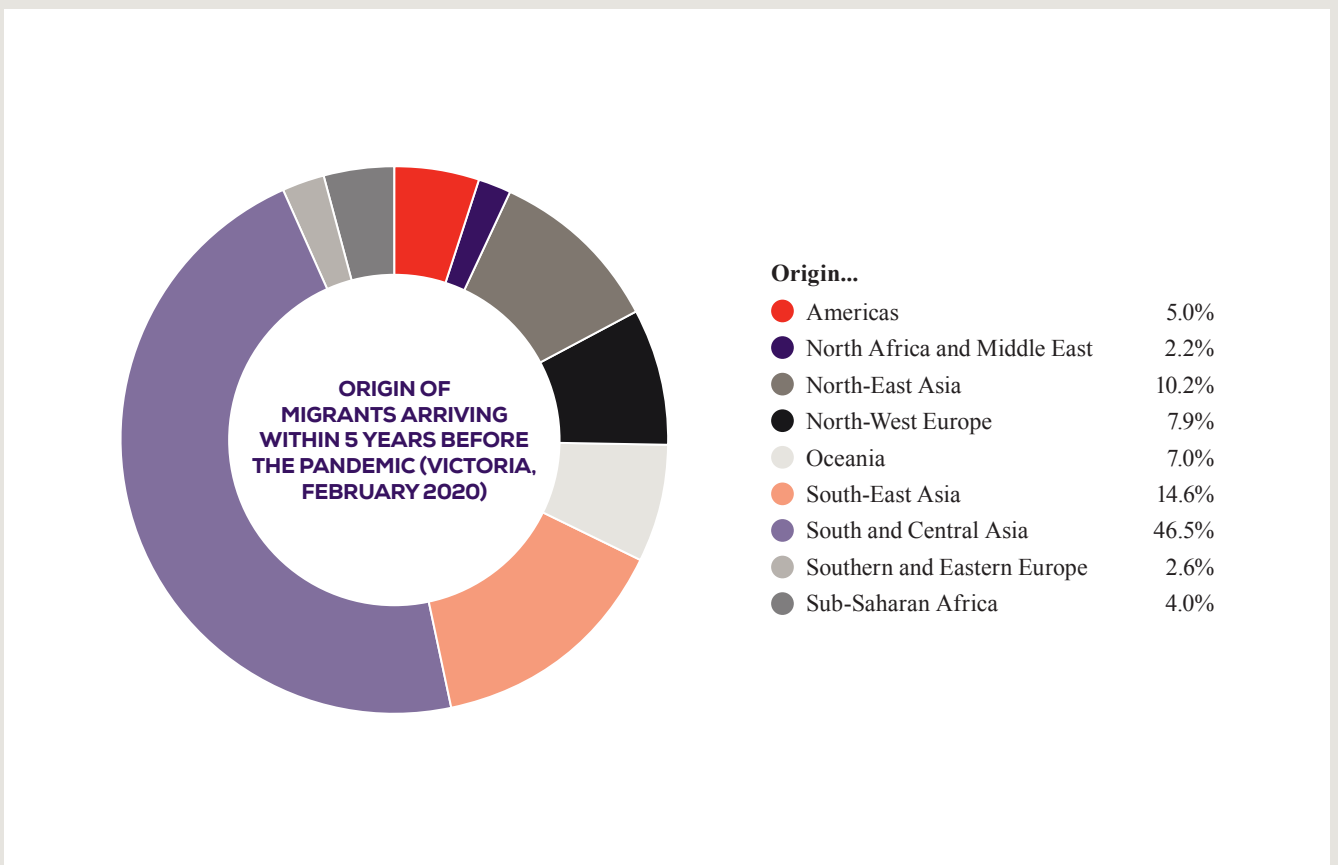
Source: Authors' calculations of data from ABS (2021)

FIGURE 4.3



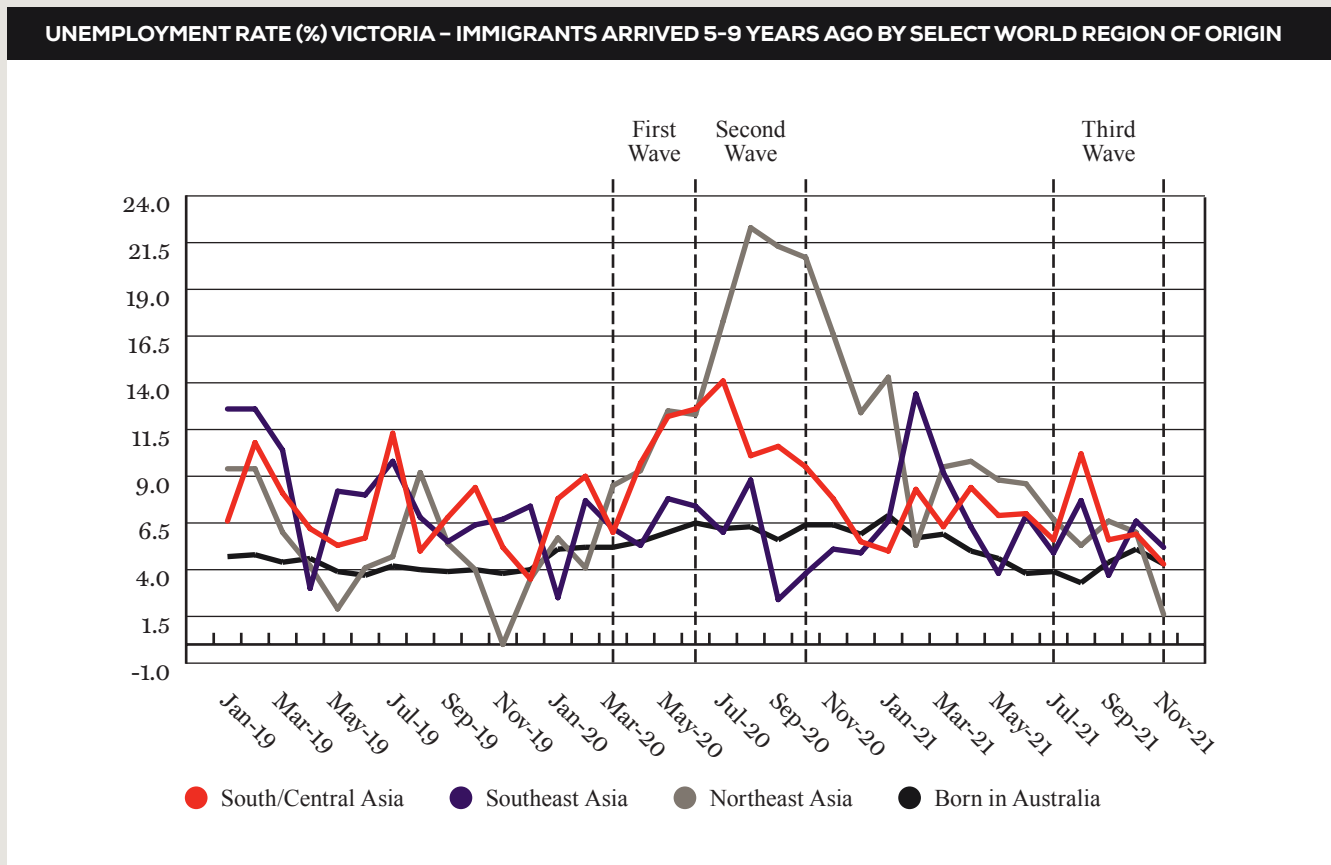
Source: Authors' calculations of data from ABS (2021)

FIGURE 4.4



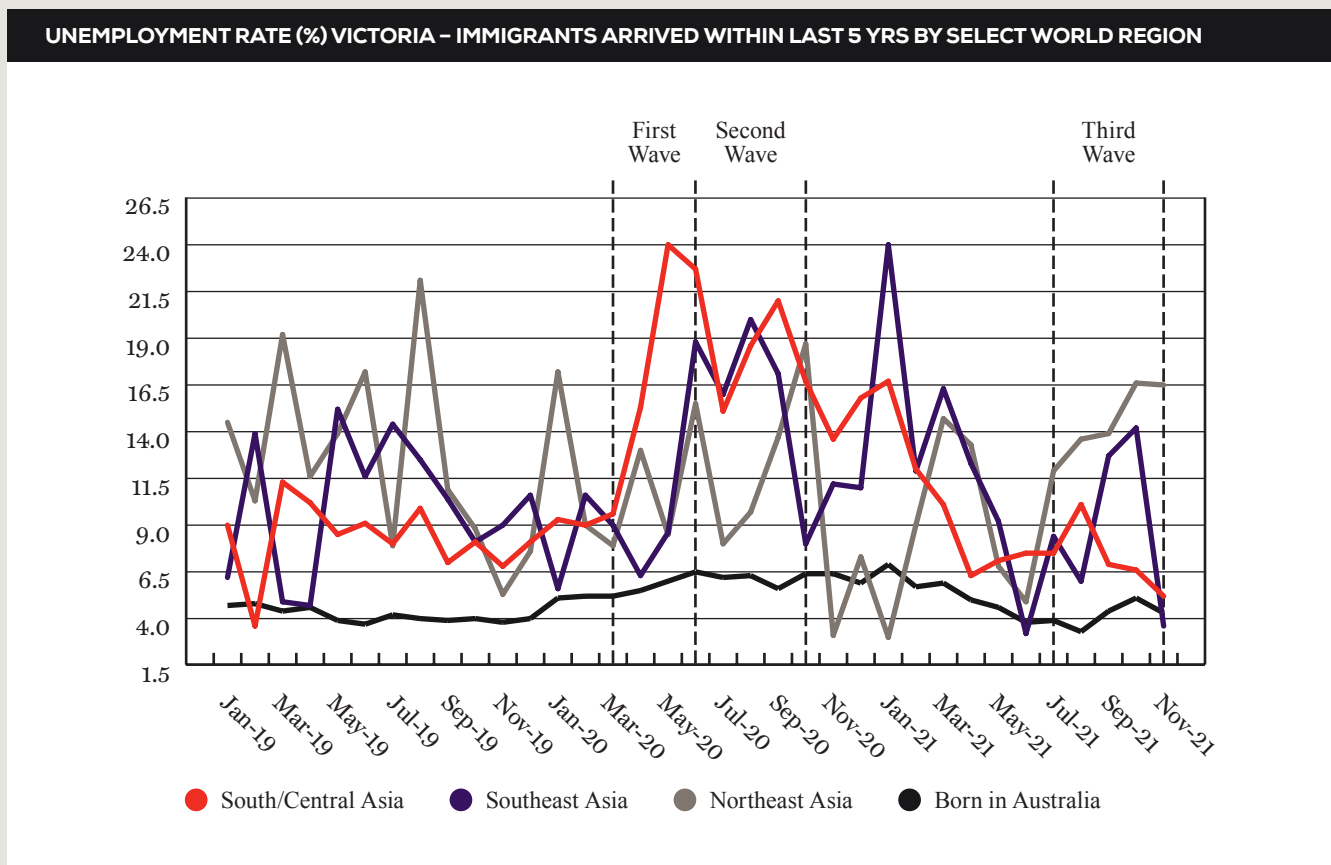
Source: Authors' calculations of data from ABS (2021)

FIGURE 4.5



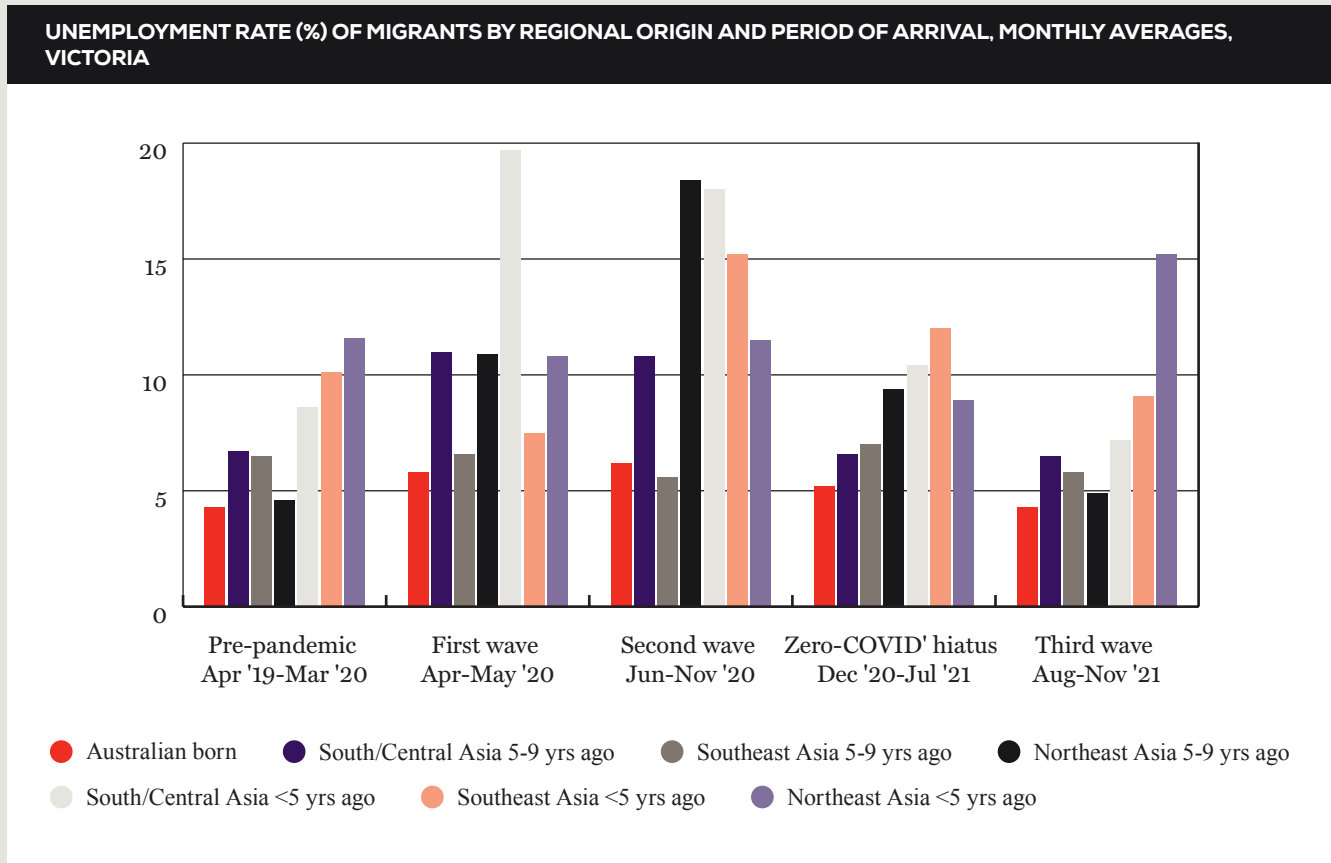
Source: Authors' calculations of data from ABS (2021)

FIGURE 4.6



Source: Authors' calculations of data from ABS (2021)

FIGURE 4.7



Source: Authors' calculations of data from ABS (2021)

5. Trends in Social Service Delivery during the COVID Crisis

The brief for this project included an assessment of demand for social services, including assistance for people experiencing or vulnerable to homelessness, food insecurity and financial insecurity, as well as assistance for women and children experiencing family violence and its multiple impacts. The intention was to analyse changes to demand for social services over the course of the pandemic, from the pre-pandemic period before February/March 2020, to the First Wave (March-June 2020), the Second Wave in Victoria (June-October 2020), to the Zero-COVID Hiatus (October 2020-June 2021), to the onset of the Third Wave (July-November 2021).

The COVID crisis exposed many people to the experience of severe financial hardship for the first time. Nearly a million people were unemployed during the first three months of the crisis, many of whom were previously protected from poverty by access to decent, well-paying employment (Janda, 2020). Millions drew down personal savings, borrowed against mortgages, or accessed superannuation savings to make ends meet.

As this report has shown, circumstances were especially difficult for people whose livelihoods depended upon the worst-affected sectors of the economy, such as hospitality and tourism, the arts, or higher education (Hurley, 2020; Kelly et al., 2020). Even in other sectors such as retail trade, logistics, construction and manufacturing, workers were affected by changes to available working hours, leading to a sharpening of insecure work and under-employment. Greater uncertainty and falling financial security forced many to experiment with extra jobs, including shift work in supermarkets, short-term work in warehouses via temporary placement agencies, or low-paid gig work in the platform economy (van Barneveld et al., 2020).

According to the project brief, this analysis was to include changes in the composition of clients or cohorts seeking help, including the rise in 'first-time' users and changes in the proportion of previous users in the context of changing eligibility and entitlements to government assistance such as JobKeeper, JobSeeker and the Coronavirus Supplement, or the proportion of age groups due to the uneven impacts of the COVID recession. Furthermore, the project design included an assessment of service providers' changing capacity to meet demand and manage client needs under conditions of intermittent or prolonged lockdown, including impacts on volunteer availability, revenue streams, and operations in terms of COVID-safety compliance burdens.

Based on these parameters, this section draws upon a range of sources which include analysis of service providers' annual reports for the years leading up to, and including FY2020/21, and analysis of time series data of project indicators provided by key service providers. To maintain data confidentiality, participating organisations have been deidentified. Organisations are referred to by code in the remainder of this report.

FALLING REVENUE FROM RETAIL SALES

The organisational capacity of several service providers was affected by changes to revenue streams during the pandemic. In several cases, organisations were able to maintain services through additional income from government grants. Financial arrangements were, nevertheless, impacted significantly.

According to the Australian Community Sector Survey in July 2020, 36 percent of social service providers reported a worsening financial position in the early period of the crisis (Cortis and Blaxland, 2020). Income streams from fundraising, donations and shopfront retail sales were all affected under conditions of lockdown.

Indicative data from two service providers with shopfront operations is presented in Figure 5.1. After many years of revenue growth, both organisations experienced significant declines in shopfront revenue—by 8.3 and 7.0 percent, respectively—during FY2019/20 as physical operations were closed for extended periods. Although Organisation G, which possesses a wider network of retail shopfronts, experienced a sharp rebound in sales in 2020/21 (20.0 percent growth), Organisation F's sales continued to decline at an even sharper pace in the most recent financial year (-10.0 percent), highlighting the sustained impacts of successive waves of the pandemic, extended lockdowns and weaker in-person spending by consumers.

GROWING FOOD INSECURITY AND DEMAND FOR MEALS

In terms of the number of meals served, data from the same two organisations demonstrates that a major increase in demand for food occurred in FY2019/20 compared to previous years. This is despite qualitative evidence of withdrawal from support services by many people experiencing homelessness who were regularly accessing services prior to the pandemic:

Some of them just withdrew back into accommodation for the whole time during COVID, and we didn't know how they were, and neither could we contact them (Organisation I, interview with researchers).

There was also evidence of a large proportion of temporary visa holders, including international students, accessing meal provisions:

That was mostly Southeast Asian and South Asian [migrants]... It was [many] international students from [countries such as] India [and] Bangladesh... with no income, no formal family structures [in Australia]. So their resilience, in terms of their social safety net, was limited (Organisation G, interview with researchers).

Service providers made various COVID-safe allowances for lockdown conditions, enabling many services to continue in an adapted form. For example, Organisation G's food distribution in the community continued through changed shift times and contact free drop-off arrangements which eliminated the need for physical proximity between volunteers and clients.

Despite the lockdown conditions that prevailed for much of this period and the lower volunteer base involved in food distribution, Organisations F and G experienced their largest annual increase in meal provision in the previous decade. For Organisation G in particular, meal provision for 2020/21 more than doubled with a 123.9 percent increase (Figure 5.2). In some inner-city suburbs of Melbourne, where the majority of meals are distributed, the increase in meals provided by Organisation G was around 2.5 times higher.

For Organisation I, the number of meals served increased by more than 1.5 times (160 percent) in 2020 compared to 2019, although this was pared back by about a third (37 percent) from 2020 to 2021. These data are testament to ongoing food insecurity during the course of the pandemic and, also, the capacity of organisations with limited resources to deliver services to those in need.

THE CHANGING PROFILE OF PEOPLE SEEKING EMERGENCY RELIEF

Emergency relief provides material or financial assistance to individuals or households struggling to survive, including vouchers or parcels for food and household essentials, emergency payments and no-interest loans. Emergency relief has continued to play a critical role in social service provision throughout the pandemic, including types of assistance tailored toward groups experiencing the most significant disadvantages, such as Aboriginal and Torres Islander peoples, refugees, asylum seekers, and women and children experiencing family violence. However, the nature of the pandemic, including successive waves and lockdowns over time, has strongly influenced the profile of those seeking assistance.

The Victorian Council of Social Services (VCOSS) has argued that the pandemic left emergency relief organisations 'facing overwhelming demand' (VCOSS, 2021). In this section, the most significant evidence about emergency relief provision comes from Organisation A which provides social services across Victoria.

Emergency relief for Organisation A spiked at key moments throughout the pandemic. Its active clients—i.e., all those who had contact with the organisation either via phone, at a client session or through receipt of assistance—increased significantly during the First Wave in 2020, including spikes of 29.5 percent in March and 37.1 percent in May. The onset of the Second Wave saw further sharp increases of 39.5 and 18.7 percent in August and September 2020. During the Zero COVID Hiatus, client numbers generally declined, beginning to rise again on the eve of the Third Wave in mid-2021 (Figure 5.3). Throughout the pandemic, most clients remained unemployed, averaging 59.2 percent of all clients from February 2020 until November 2021.

These changes, however, conceal important changes in the composition of groups accessing emergency relief. In gender terms, the vast majority of clients have long been women. Prior to the pandemic, over three-quarters of Organisation A's clients were women and, despite a small rise in the proportion of men seeking assistance during the pandemic, the proportion of women rose back above 70 percent during the course of 2021.⁵ This gender dynamic was also reflected in the continuing high proportion of single parent clients, although the impact of the pandemic on job losses also brought about a sharp rise in the number of couples with dependent children. This category nearly quadrupled over the course of 2020 due to the impact of the First and Second Waves on jobs and remained high throughout 2021. Even by November 2021, there were nearly twice as many couples with dependent children seeking emergency relief compared to early 2020, prior to the pandemic.

In age terms, the greater employment impact of the pandemic on young people was reflected in the changing age composition of those seeking emergency relief. Prior to the pandemic, the highest proportion of clients was in the 35-44 age group, which represented almost a third of the total (33.5 percent) in February 2020. The cumulative impacts of the First and Second Waves pushed the proportion of younger clients into a much higher position than previously. The proportion of clients aged under 25 increased by 2.5 times from February-August 2020—from 5.0 to 12.5 percent—while the proportion of clients aged 25-34 increased by

5. The proportion of refugees or asylum seekers seeking specialist assistance from Organisation A was dominated by women to an even greater extent, rarely dropping below 75 percent of all clients in this category during the pandemic and trending back above 80 percent in the latter half of 2021.

approximately one third—from 20.3 to 30.7 percent—from February–October 2020 (Figure 5.4).

This finding likely reflects the significant impact of 2020's COVID recession on job losses in industries and sectors which relied primarily upon younger workers (cf. Section 2). Furthermore, as Figure 5.4 also shows, the impact of the Third Wave corresponded with further sharp spikes in emergency relief assistance for young people aged 25–34, including a rise from 24.3 to 28.0 in August 2021.

A further important compositional change was in spatial terms. The more severe social and economic impact of extended lockdowns on Greater Melbourne compared to most of regional Victoria was reflected in a rising share of Greater Melbourne clients in Organisation A's total clientele state-wide. Prior to the pandemic, active clients in Greater Melbourne represented fewer than a third of all clients in Victoria. During the First and Second Waves, this proportion rose to over half of all clients, before declining again from mid-2021 (Figure 5.5).

A further compositional shift was the proportion of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) clients, reflected in the proportion of those born overseas as well as the proportion who primarily spoke a language other than English at home. The First and Second Waves pushed the proportion of clients born overseas from 36.0 percent in February 2020 to 61.5 percent in September 2020, before declining after the Second Wave. The proportion of those who primarily spoke a language other than English at home almost doubled from 25.4 to 50.3 percent over the same period of 2020 (Figure 5.6).

Within the cohort of clients born overseas, long-term migrants (those who arrived more than ten years ago) were the dominant group prior to the pandemic. However, the proportion of the most recent arrivals—those arriving within the last five years—increased significantly during the First and Second Waves, rising from 16.3 to 46.8 percent from February–September 2020. Over this period, the total number of recent arrivals seeking emergency relief increased by a remarkable 14 times. Long-term migrants declined commensurately from 64.2 to less than 25 percent of all clients born overseas over the same period. Although these proportions tended to reverse after the Second Wave, a notable feature during the pandemic was the long-term rise in the proportion of migrants arriving five to ten years ago, rising steadily from less than a fifth (18 percent) in January 2020 to more than a third (36.9 percent) by November 2021 (Figure 5.7).

The social and economic impacts of the pandemic—the First and Second Waves in particular—were disastrous for thousands of people on temporary migration visas (cf. Section 4). This experience is reflected in the sharp rise in emergency relief recipients on temporary visas during the pandemic. As a percentage of all emergency relief clients at Organisation A, temporary visa holders increased from 31.5 percent in February 2020 to a peak of 58.2 percent in September 2020. The overall proportion of migrants on humanitarian visas also increased during this time (Figure 5.8).

One of the key migrant groups disadvantaged by the crisis were those on student visas. While a smaller minority of total clients, Organisation A's provision of emergency relief during the pandemic echoes this finding. The proportion of clients on student visas increased sharply from February–August

2020. While this proportion declined after the Second Wave subsided, it remained at a level well above the pre-pandemic experience (Figure 5.9).

The composition of demand for emergency relief also changed in terms of income groups. The proportion of clients in the lowest income group (\$0–\$149 per week) rose sharply from 6.4 percent prior to the pandemic (January 2020) to 30.8 percent in the middle of the Second Wave (August 2020). The absolute number of clients in this category increased over 13-fold during this period (Figure 5.10).

This finding invites three further reflections. First, the lowest income group is dominated by those with no weekly income. Even before the pandemic (January 2020), 70 percent in the \$0–\$149 category had zero weekly income. This proportion rose to over 90 percent by October 2020 and did not drop below 80 percent for the remainder of 2020 and 2021.

Second, the number of clients in the lowest income group correlates strongly with clients on temporary migration visas. Over the course of the pandemic, the change in low-income clients and temporary migrant clients occurred on a near one-to-one basis.

Third, although the proportion of clients in this lowest income group declined as the Second Wave subsided, it remained throughout 2021 at levels that were much higher than the pre-pandemic period. This is illustrated in Figure 5.11 which shows Organisation A's total emergency relief clientele divided by weekly income groups. Each column in Figure 5.11 represents the average weekly income for each key period of the pandemic. As demonstrated above, the number of clients in the lowest-income group increased significantly from 7.5 percent, on average, before the pandemic to 25.3 percent by the Second Wave. However, even though this percentage declined after the Second Wave, it remained more than double the pre-pandemic level. Even during the Zero COVID Hiatus—a period of supposedly rapid economic recovery—16.3 percent of clients remained in the lowest income group. In addition, the proportion of clients who received less than \$300 per week increased from 28.6 percent before the pandemic to 32.2 percent during the Zero COVID Hiatus, rising again during the Third Wave (Figure 5.11).

However, the experience of Organisation A does not provide the full picture because the available data concern 'active clients' month to month—it does not distinguish between new clients and existing clients or between the means of contact between individuals and service providers, such as phone calls, in-person meetings or interactions.

Incorporation of alternative data on inbound calls for assistance suggests that the emergency fiscal measures of 2020 led to an *overall decline* in demand for assistance such as emergency relief or family violence during FY2019/20. In the following 12 months, demand for assistance recovered sharply (Figure 5.12). The next part of this section addresses why this shift occurred.

THE MITIGATING IMPACT OF THE CORONAVIRUS SUPPLEMENT ON DEMAND FOR EMERGENCY RELIEF

The context of declining demand for services in FY2019/20 represented in Figure 5.12 is the social impact of extended lockdowns during the first and early parts of the Second Wave and the economic impacts of the Federal Government's emergency fiscal measures such as JobKeeper and the Coronavirus Supplement. However, the *precise nature* of change was highly dependent on the type of service, as we explain below.

For example, the documented effect of the role of the Coronavirus Supplement in mitigating the effects of unemployment, under-employment, financial hardship, and poverty is likely to be linked to a decline in the number of callers seeking emergency relief or other assistance related to material needs.

Supporting this conclusion, Organisation G reported a decline in almost all categories of material assistance for FY2019/20, including food purchases or emergency payments to cover utility bills, medical expenses or other cost-of-living expenses. There is also evidence of a decline in JobSeeker recipients calling service providers for assistance and a corresponding rise in 'zero income' callers such as international students and other temporary visa holders excluded from JobKeeper and JobSeeker.

Organisation G reported a fall in total calls from a peak of around 4,250 in February 2020 to 2,500 or less for the duration of the First and Second Waves until October 2020. Even by June 2021, total calls remained below 3,500, well below pre-pandemic levels. The fall for in-bound calls during 2020 was captured for most caller categories, including JobSeeker recipients for whom there was a fall of more than 50 percent from February to May 2020.

In stark contrast, the number of 'zero income' callers increased by 2.5 times from February-September 2020. Zero income callers were also more likely to be first-time callers. In July 2020, during the early weeks of the Second Wave, 16.8 percent of first-time callers had no income—a smaller proportion than callers on JobSeeker (25.9 percent) and Disability Support Pension (DSP) (24.6 percent). By the following month, zero income callers had become the largest group proportionally. By September 2020, zero income callers represented 30.8 percent of first-time callers, compared to 26.8 percent for JobSeeker recipients. By the end of the Second Wave, zero-income callers were the largest group, temporarily surpassing the number of JobSeeker or DSP recipients.

Indicatively, almost all of these callers were from a CALD background, with country backgrounds in Asia or the Middle East, with a high number of international students and refugees, and who frequently reported English language communication difficulties. Job loss impacts and the threat or reality of homelessness were common refrains. All callers requested help with food insecurity—for example, food vouchers—and many asked for help paying for household bills.

At Organisation A, asylum seekers and refugees seeking emergency relief in Victoria—almost 80 percent of whom were based in Greater Melbourne during the pandemic—were dominated by those with little-to-no household income

due to a combination of job losses, workplace closures, lockdown restrictions as well as visa restrictions which negatively affected access to jobs or welfare transfers. During the pandemic to date (March 2020-November 2021), over 70 percent of refugees and asylum seekers who sought emergency relief had total household income of less than \$300 per week.

Also at Organisation A, the number of clients experiencing homelessness more than quadrupled in March 2020 during the early days of the First Wave. This number generally rose throughout the pandemic. Even by November 2021, on the eve of the Fourth (Omicron) Wave, there were nearly twice the number of clients experiencing homelessness than prior to the pandemic. Meanwhile, the number of clients who stated they were 'at risk' of homelessness doubled over the course of 2020. Even by November 2021, the number of clients at risk of homelessness remained 30 percent higher than before the pandemic.

After falling briefly at the beginning of 2021, the number of zero income callers began to rise again by June 2021, prior to the onset of the Third Wave in Victoria. While the most common request for assistance remained food and groceries, the number and proportion of people asking for assistance in purchasing clothing—for example, for everyday needs, winter warmth or for children—climbed steadily from late 2020 until mid-2021.

As lockdown conditions tightened in Victoria in mid-2020, there was also a spike in demand for furniture and household goods:

which makes sense [because] you're at home, all the time, so the kids needed a desk now [or] a computer. This [increase in demand] was noticeable (Organisation G, interview with researchers).

These changes are shown graphically below. Figure 5.13 shows the marked decline for in-bound calls during the First Wave, followed by ongoing declines each month until September 2020, as Second Wave coronavirus case numbers in Victoria were gradually brought under control due to the extended lockdown. In October and November, calls began to increase again—albeit from a much lower base—before falling again in December. Organisation G experienced a near-doubling of calls in February 2021 (82.6 percent rise) before experiencing month-to-month fluctuations for the remainder of the year (Figure 5.13).

Figure 5.14 shows the changing proportion of first-time callers and zero income callers throughout 2020 and 2021. This data shows that the proportion of the former continued to rise from the beginning of the First Wave until peaking at over a quarter of all in-bound calls in September 2020, then declining after the Second Wave subsided in Victoria. However, the proportion of first-time callers began to rise again during the Third Wave. A similar trend was experienced for the latter category of zero income callers, peaking at 14 percent—over 1 in every 7 callers—in September before also beginning to decline as lockdown conditions gradually ended and employment opportunities began to recover.

FAMILY VIOLENCE SERVICES DURING THE PANDEMIC

Previous research has established that the First Wave of the pandemic saw an increase in the prevalence of family and domestic violence in Australia (Carrington et al., 2021). One of the most cited surveys was conducted in early 2021 and found that, since the start of the pandemic, 1 in 10 respondents in Australia had experienced physical violence, 1 in 12 had experienced sexual violence, and almost a third had experienced 'emotionally abusive, harassing and controlling behaviours'. For each category, approximately 2 in every 5 respondents reported an increase in the severity or frequency of violence (Boxall and Morgan, 2021).

Like Organisation E (cf. Figure 5.12), Organisation D reported a decline in inbound calls by women experiencing family violence and a corresponding fall in case management numbers for FY2019/20. Organisation E and Organisation F both recorded a decline in the total number of women and children assisted with crisis accommodation.

In sharp contrast to emergency relief services, however, the decline in the number of family violence-related calls for FY2019/20 should *not* be attributed to a temporary decline in the need for assistance. These trends are, instead, influenced by the nature of lockdown conditions which, during the First Wave and the early weeks of the Second Wave in Victoria, acted as a barrier or further disincentive for women and children who may have otherwise sought to flee violent situations:

Initially there was a substantial drop in [in bound] phone calls, which was really alarming because it didn't mean there was less need. It was probably more to do with lack of opportunity really to make that phone call given you're locked down with the person that's abusing you... Perpetrators would use [COVID] as a form of control by saying, 'You can't leave, you're stuck with me', or 'I won't let you back in if you've been out [because] you might get COVID'. [Perpetrators] were really using that as part of coercive controlling. So I think that also meant a lot of people didn't feel like [they] could leave... So we did see initial drop [in calls]. But since then, it's just continued to increase (Organisation E, interview with researchers).

Service providers also reported an increase in the proportion of women on temporary visas seeking support due to family violence. One survey found that nearly half (45 percent) of case workers supporting women in this category reported an increase in violence experienced by clients. There were also some changes in the source of violence—for example, an increase in female migrants who experienced abuse, harassment or violence from housemates while living in shared housing arrangements (Berg and Farbenblum, 2020).

A Queensland University of Technology survey of family violence case workers in 2020 found most agencies experienced rising case numbers and a rising number of victims from CALD communities. In total, 2 in every 5 participants reported a significant rise in cases involving coercive and controlling behaviour (Carrington et al., 2020). There was also evidence of family violence becoming more severe:

What was [already] coercive control and emotional abuse was becoming physical abuse. There were definite signs of

an increase in the level of violence, in the duration and the intensity (Organisation H, interview with researchers).

Lockdown conditions exacerbated many prevailing problems confronting women and children fleeing family violence.

In general, the duration of emergency accommodation was extended as clients and service providers struggled to find more permanent accommodation arrangements:

The private rental system is way out of control in terms of cost. For public housing, the waiting list is so ridiculously high and social housing is still really difficult. There's [new funding for social and community housing in Victoria] so, hopefully, in a couple of years' time things will look a bit different (Organisation H, interview with researchers).

A further sign of change during the pandemic was evidence of a shift in the demographic composition of women and children seeking to flee family violence. For example, Organisation E reported an increase in the proportion of women from CALD backgrounds seeking assistance—from 22 percent in FY2018/19 to 26 percent in FY2019/20.

A DECLINING VOLUNTEER BASE

During the successive lockdowns of 2020 and 2021, social services were affected severely by having to close, reduce or significantly modify services involving in-person interaction with people seeking assistance. Organisations previously able to offer face-to-face assistance or home visitations were forced to close or switch to remote delivery such as phone calls or COVID-safe delivery of shopping vouchers or hampers.

Organisations' volunteer base contracted as those aged over 70 or those with existing medical conditions withdrew from activity. According to a survey run by the Centre for Social Research at the Australian National University for Volunteering Australia, around two thirds of volunteers in Australia stopped working during the First Wave, with particularly high dropout among older volunteers as well as women (Biddle and Gray, 2020). According to the Australian Community Sector Survey in July 2020, 58 percent of social service providers reported a decline in volunteers during the First Wave (Cortis and Blaxland, 2020).

The declining volunteer base intersected with the compliance burden of lockdown rules and COVID-safe operations to worsen the difficulties of adaptation during the depths of the crisis in 2020. This burden was particularly acute for small organisations with the most limited staffing and financial resources:

It was incredibly hard. One of [our] staff [spent], say, a third of [their] time—and that's a fulltime workload—a third of a fulltime workload just keeping an eye on COVID rules, writing out and thinking about COVID, redoing plans and permits, and just synthesising anything that [came] from government...

They would read everything, listen to [the Victorian Premier's] press conferences every morning, and then kind of work out how that related to us... It was huge because we're a small service... The administrative burden has been huge. [We're] just lucky [that we've] got such incredibly competent [staff] (Organisation H, interview with researchers).

Organisations with larger programs were also severely affected. For example, chaplaincy and counselling services for school students were significantly disrupted by the pandemic. Some organisations in this category took the proactive step of requiring that volunteers who were more vulnerable to COVID-19, such as those aged over 70, withdraw from all activities which required an in-person presence, including home visits, volunteering at assistance centres or in retail outlets.

A positive sign is that volunteer numbers did not decline for *all* organisations during the pandemic despite the restrictive conditions of lockdown. Some organisations' volunteer base continued to increase during FY2020/21. Volunteer numbers were also sensitive to the type of work undertaken.

As an indication of these impacts, time series data for volunteer numbers and working hours are shown in Table 5.1 below for Organisation A. While volunteer numbers and working hours increased from February-March 2020 as the First Wave of the pandemic emerged, they declined thereafter. From March-April, volunteer numbers and working hours more than halved and then continued to

decline throughout the year as Victoria entered the Second Wave. From March-July 2020, volunteer numbers declined by 64 percent and then remained steady for much of the latter half of the year. However, the impact on volunteer hours was even greater, declining by 96 percent from March-November. This trend continued into 2021, even during the Zero-COVID Hiatus from late 2020 until mid-2021. In 2021, Organisation A's volunteer base remained steady (with a one-off decline in July) but there was a significant spike in volunteer hours in March 2021—an increase of more than four times. This increase was concentrated especially among those volunteering for emergency relief services.

This finding suggests that greater pressure was placed on active volunteers to maintain key services during the pandemic. Figure 5.15 supports this view by plotting the ratio between volunteer hours and active volunteers, month-by-month. This data demonstrates that hours per active volunteer fell in the latter half of 2020 as Victoria experienced its second extended lockdown during the Second Wave. Importantly, however, the Zero-COVID Hiatus did not bring relief in terms of increased numbers to lessen the burden of service delivery on the smaller active volunteer base. From February-April 2021, average hours per active volunteer increased more than fivefold, from 1.8 to 10 hours per volunteer per month. The most recent data suggests that average hours per volunteer remained high until the eve of the Fourth (Omicron) Wave, which suggests that volunteer numbers are yet to recover to pre-pandemic levels despite the easing of restrictions under COVID public health orders.

By way of historical comparison, average monthly hours per volunteer from February-November 2021 were 8.0—significantly higher than the average for FY2018/19 (i.e., the last pre-pandemic FY) of 5.3. During that year, Organisation A experienced an overall increase in its volunteer base of 62.8 percent, compared to the decline experienced in 2020.

As well as the withdrawal of volunteers due to the public health impacts of COVID-19, a further reason for declining volunteer numbers is that several services could not be delivered under lockdown conditions. Examples include prison chaplaincy services or some English language services for refugees and asylum seekers. In other cases, volunteering numbers were influenced by the remote delivery of some services.

As an indication, Organisation G's volunteer base in food distribution to people experiencing vulnerability in the community fell even though its overall volunteer base increased (Figure 5.16). For FY2020/21, this decline was greater, with an overall decline in volunteers of nearly 15 percent. Volunteer shifts declined by around two thirds across Melbourne, often forcing services in the busiest inner-city suburbs to operate with minimal staffing. For Organisation F, there was a 67 percent decline in volunteers involved in food distribution/meal serving in 2020/21.

TABLE 5.1

CHANGES TO VOLUNTEERING AT ORGANISATION A DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC				
Δ/MONTH (%)	TOTAL VOLUNTEERS		VOLUNTEER HOURS	
	2020	2021	2020	2021
JANUARY	-	0	-	0
FEBRUARY	-12.2	0	31.1	0
MARCH	69.2	0	106.9	421.4
APRIL	-56.4	0	-56.6	9.6
MAY	-6.3	0	-20.6	-25
JUNE	0	0	-10.3	-1.7
JULY	-11.1	-12.5	-66.3	1.7
AUGUST	0	0	0	0
SEPTEMBER	0	0	-10	0
OCTOBER	0	0	0	0
NOVEMBER	0	0	-44.4	16.7
DECEMBER	-100	-100	-100	-100

FIGURE 5.1

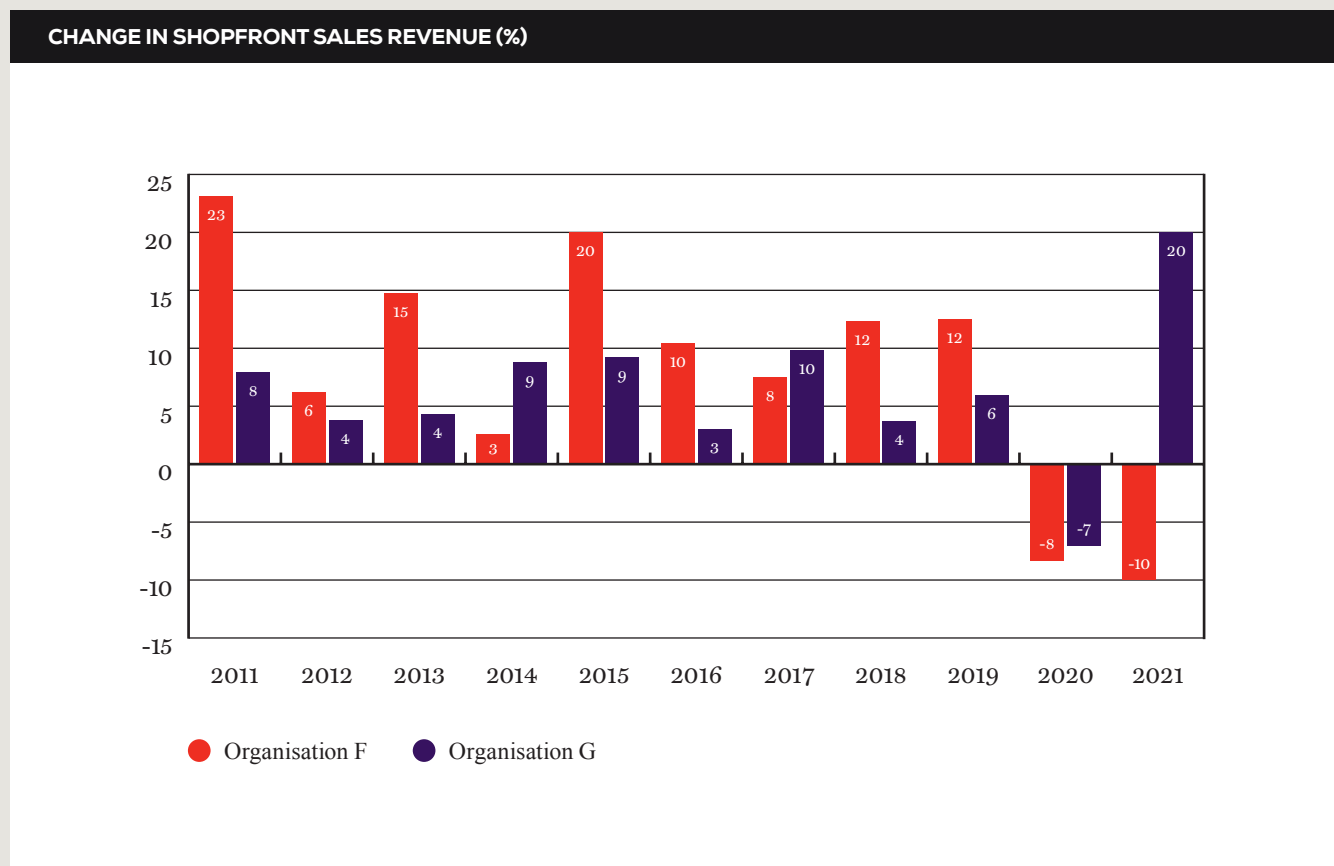


FIGURE 5.2

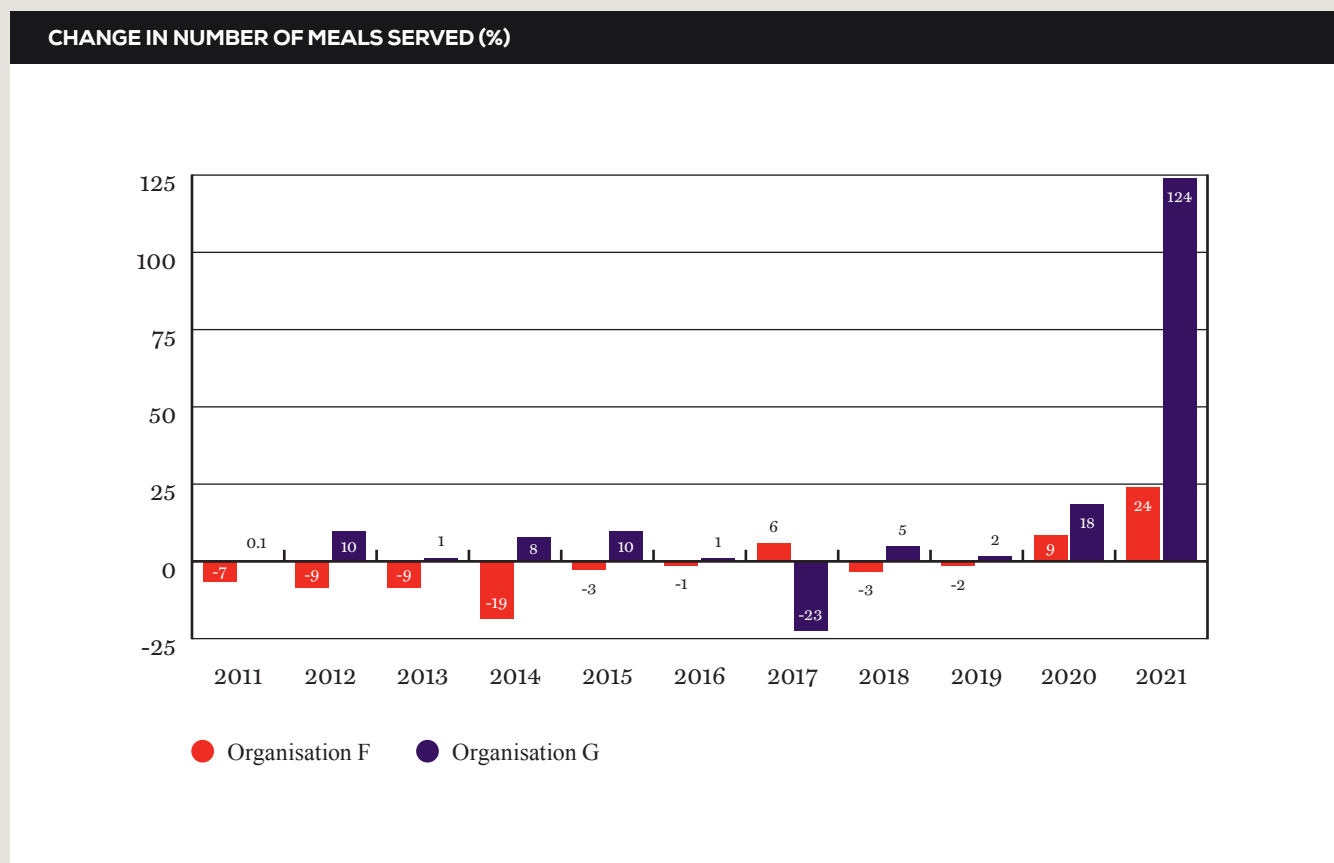


FIGURE 5.3

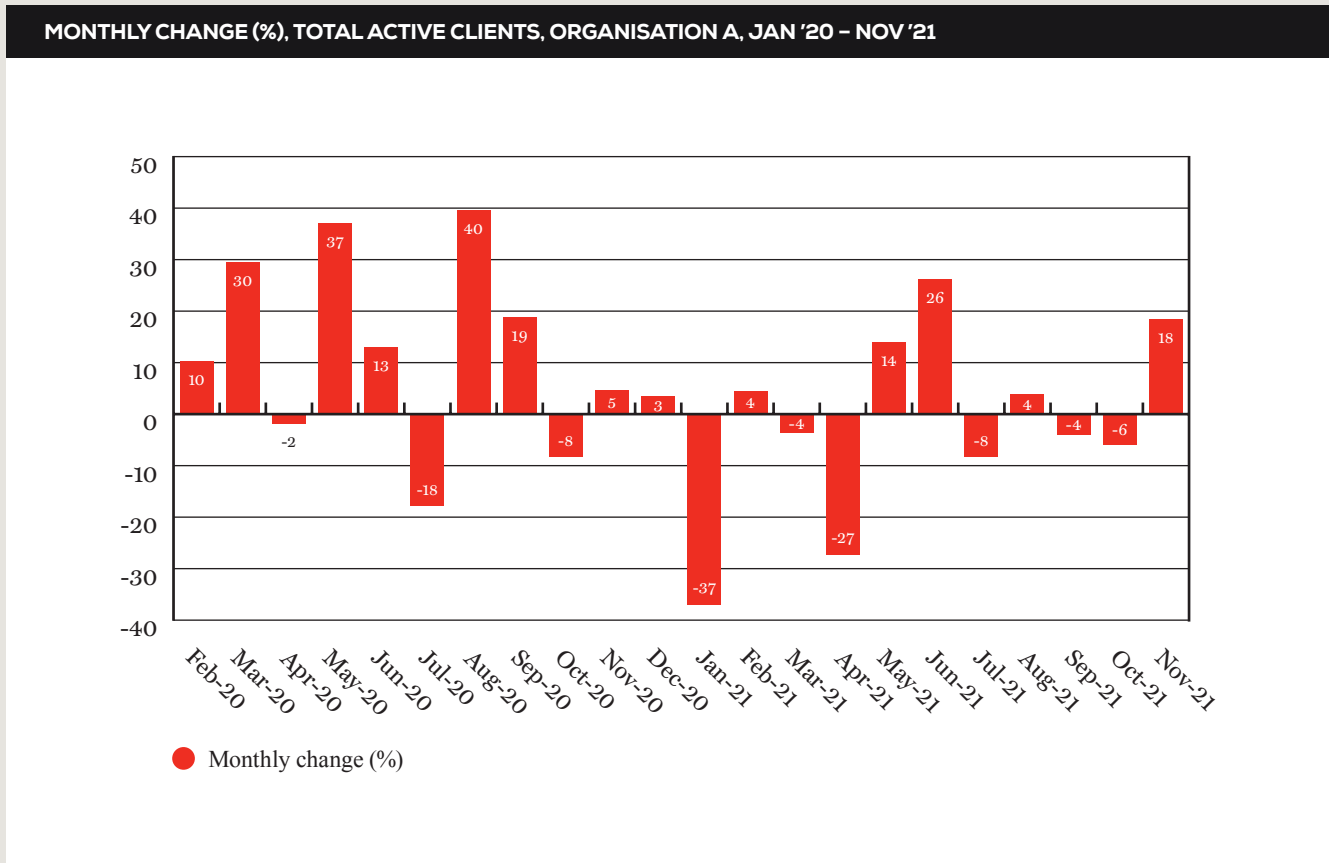


FIGURE 5.4

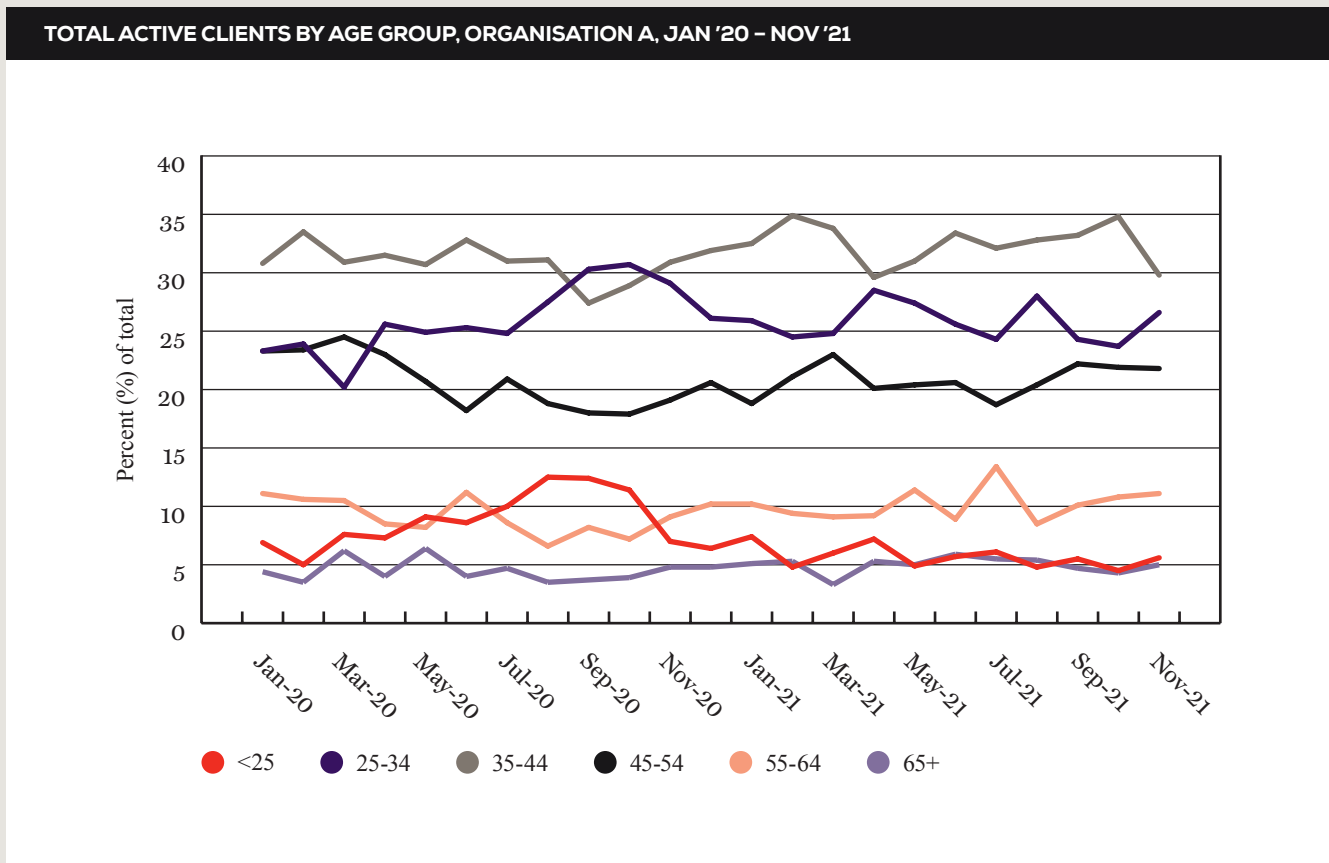


FIGURE 5.5

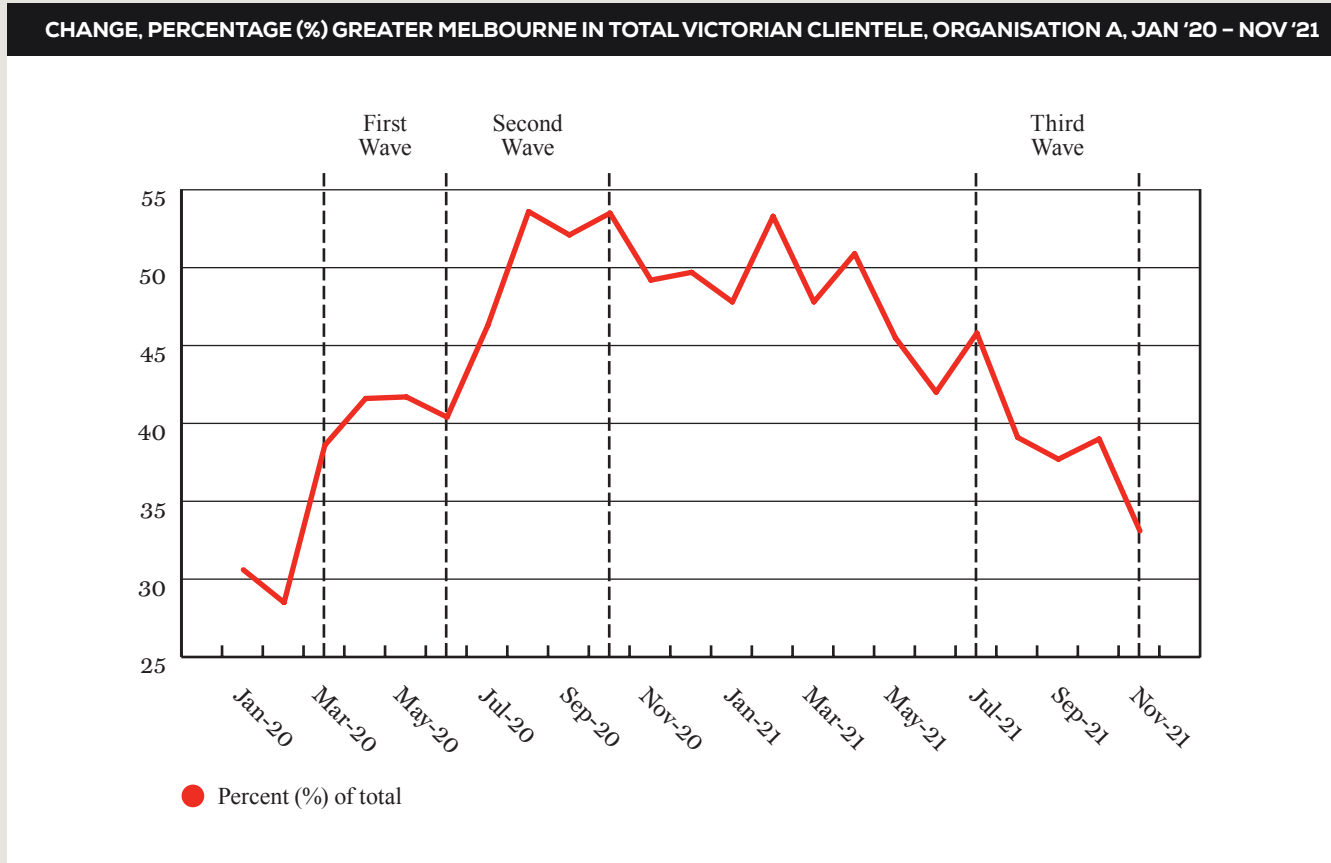


FIGURE 5.6

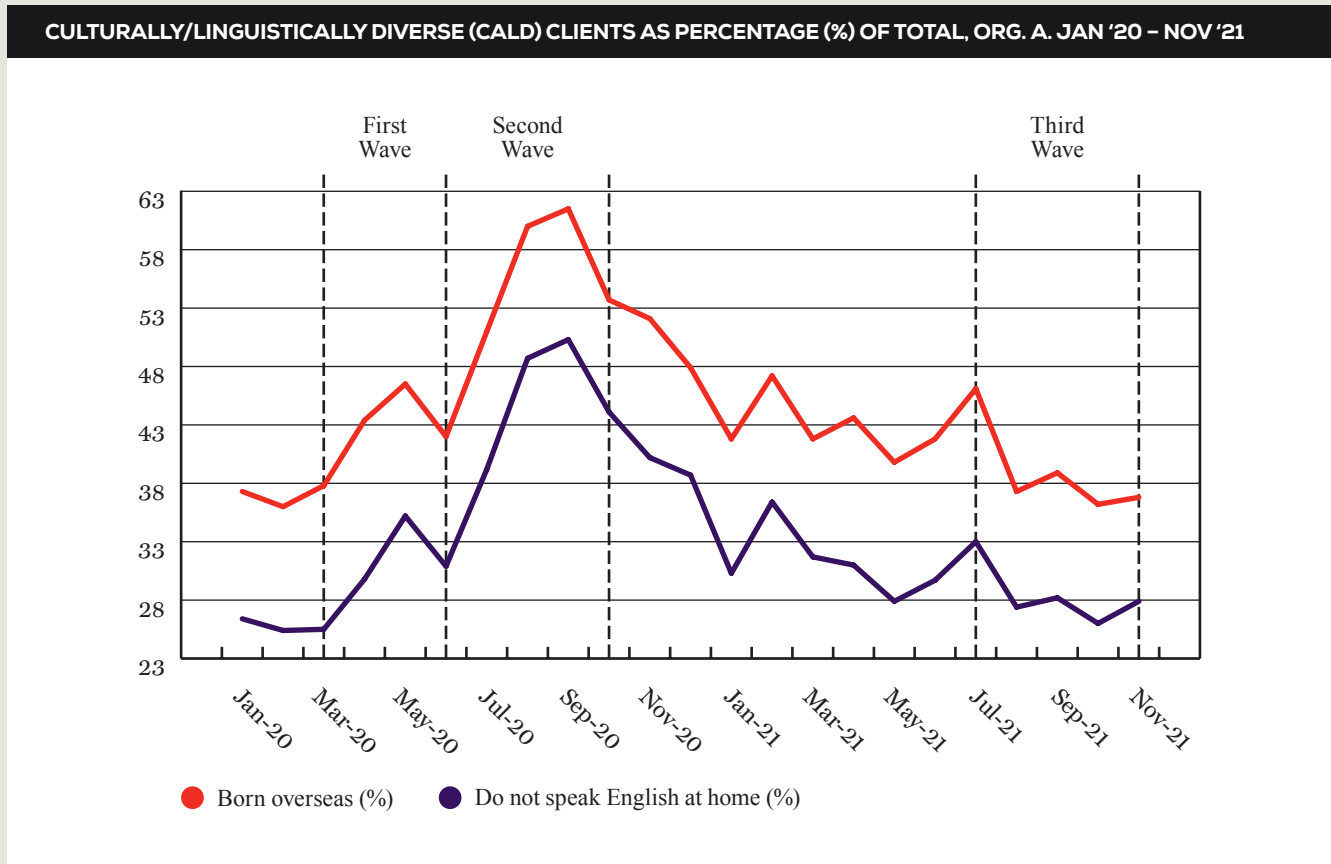


FIGURE 5.7

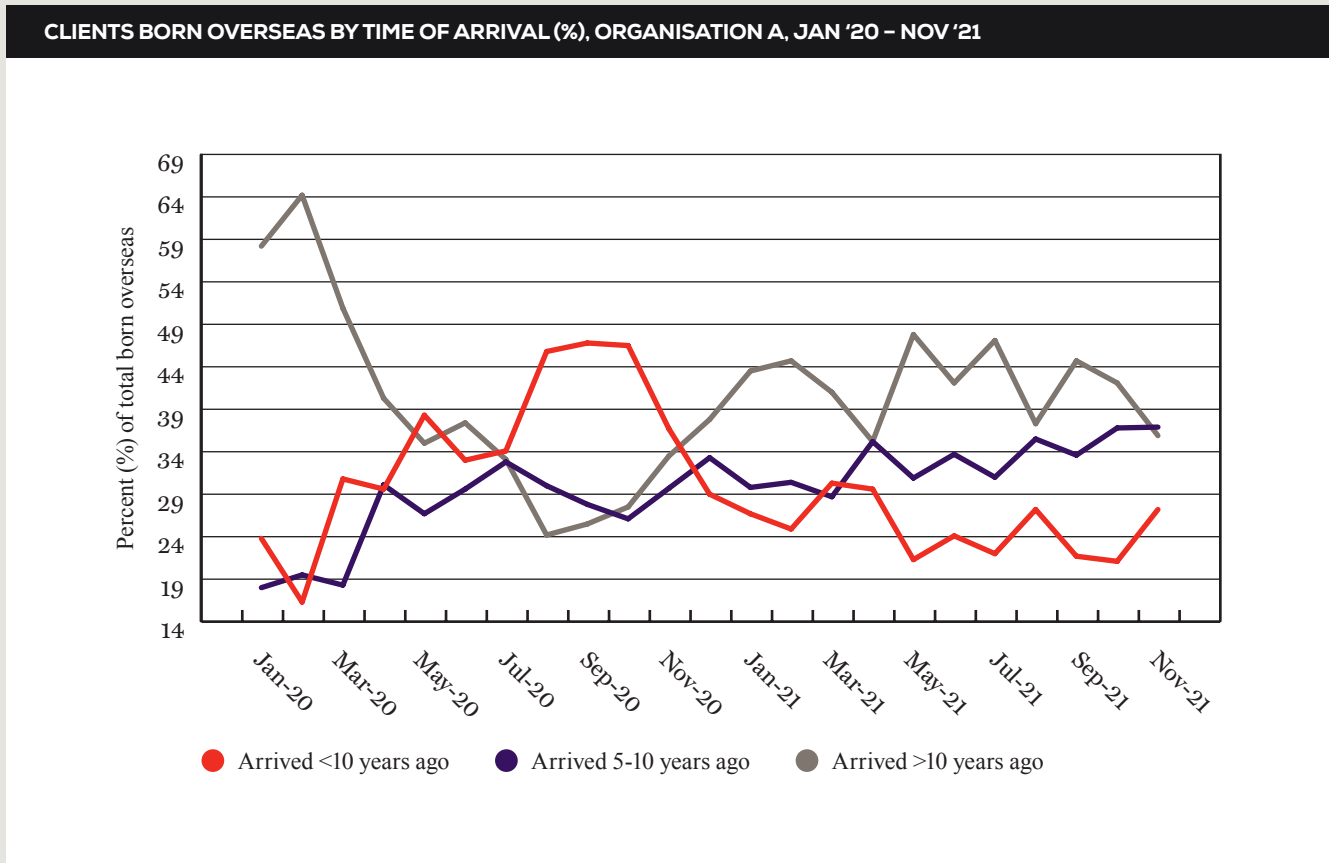


FIGURE 5.8

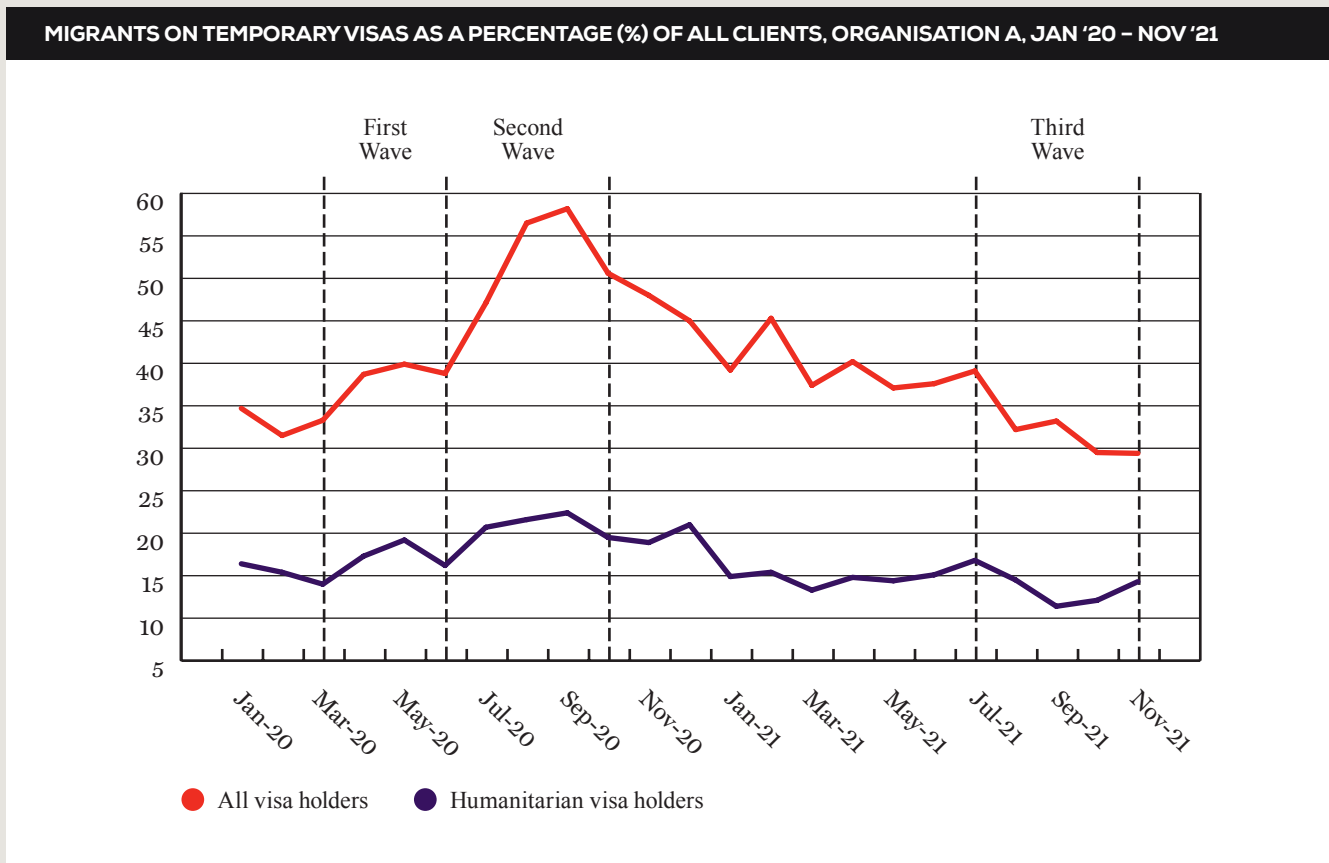


FIGURE 5.9

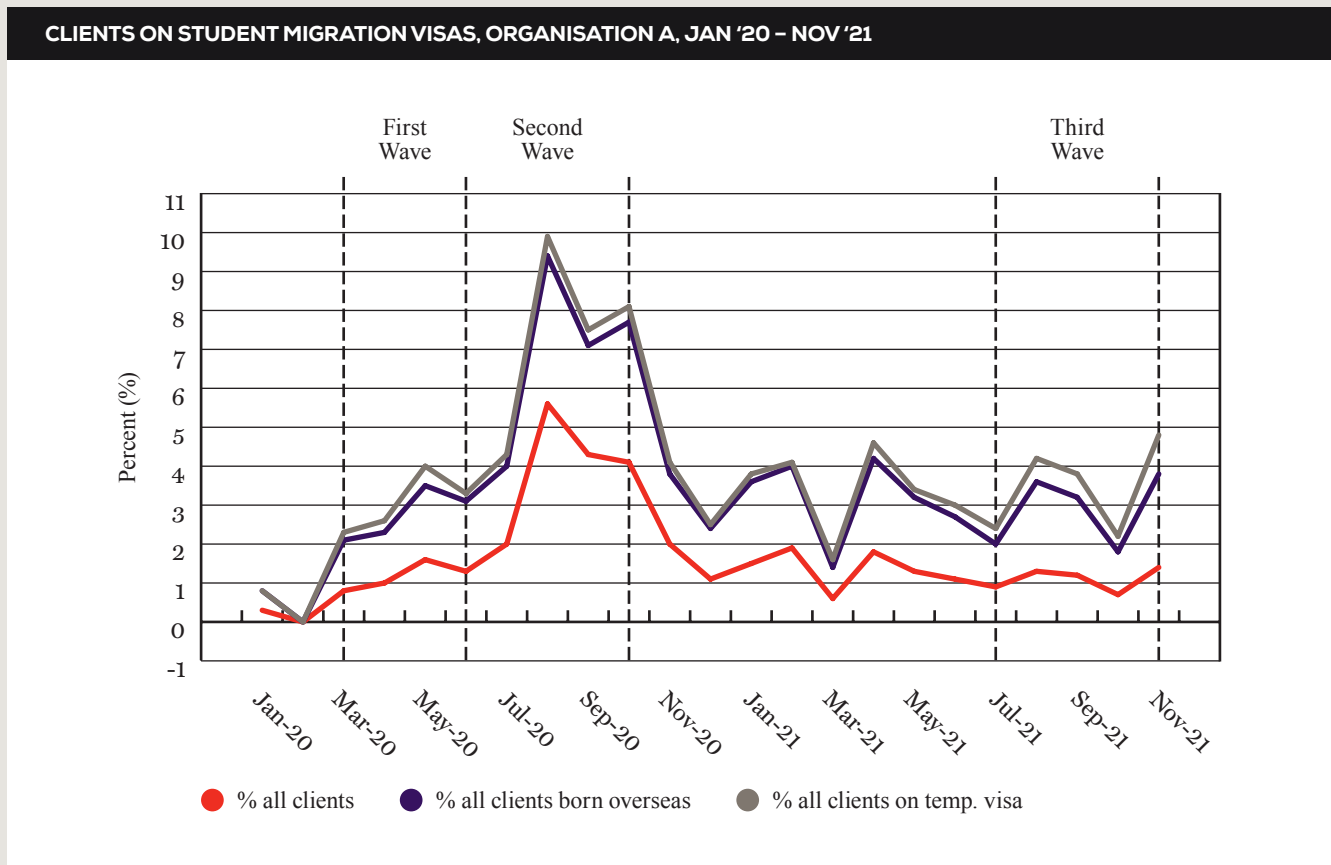


FIGURE 5.10

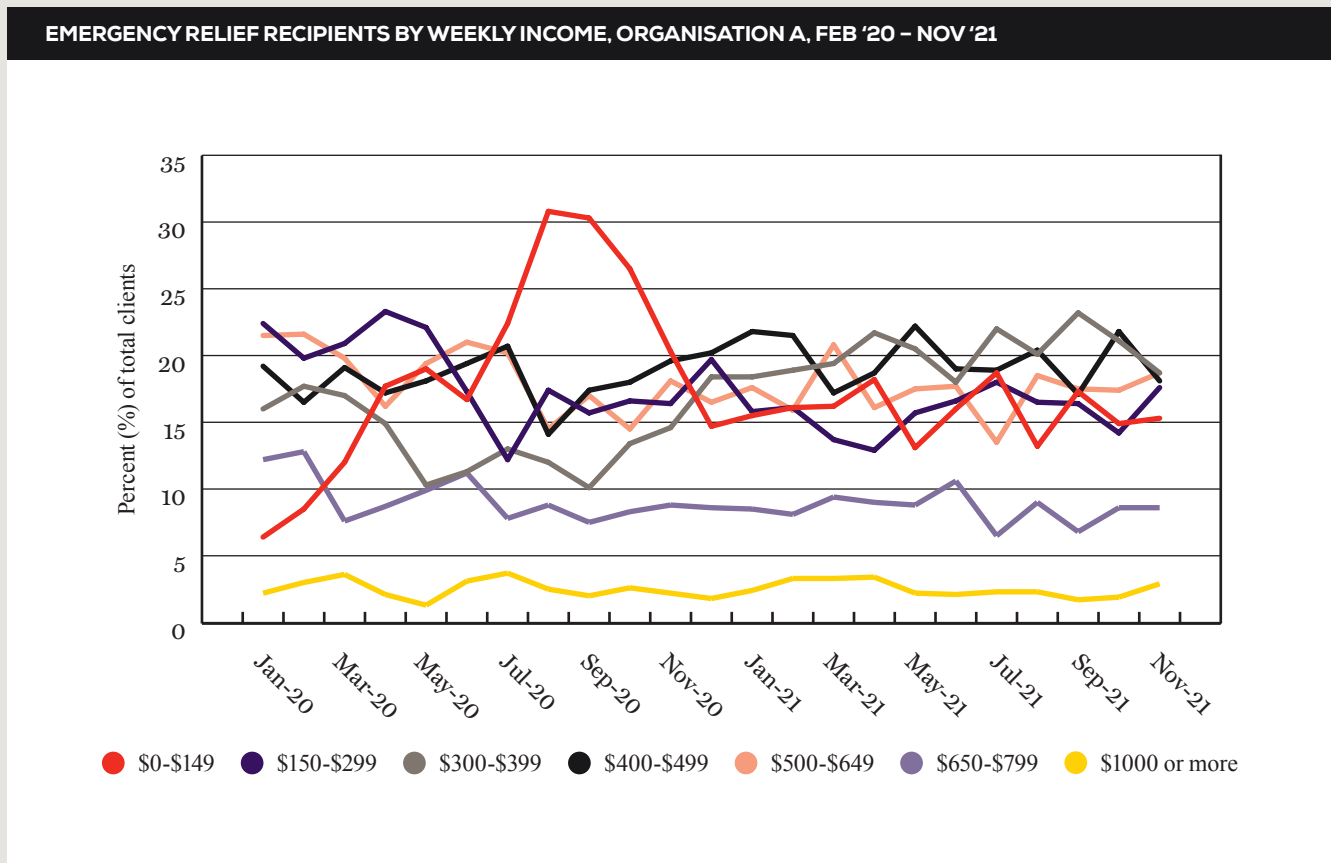


FIGURE 5.11

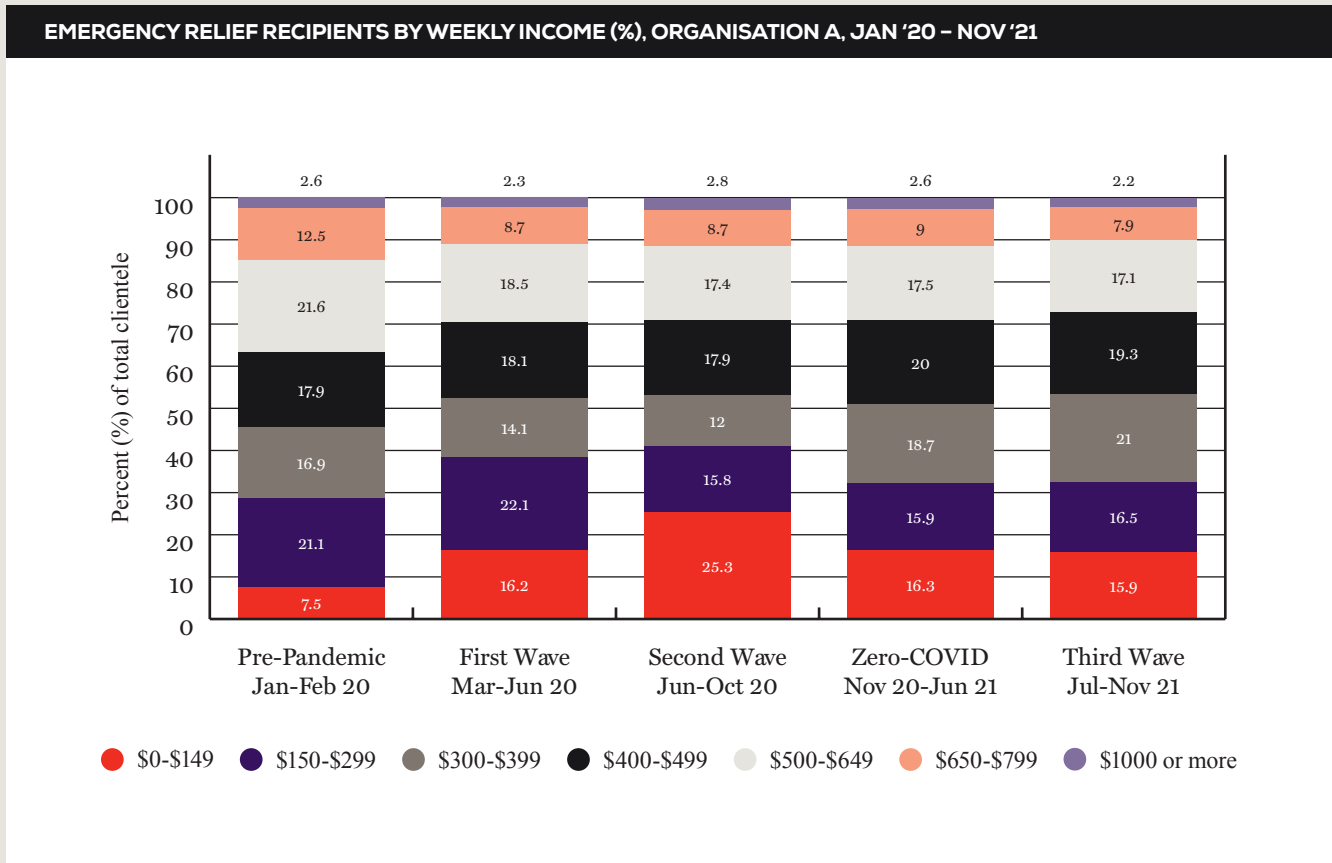


FIGURE 5.12

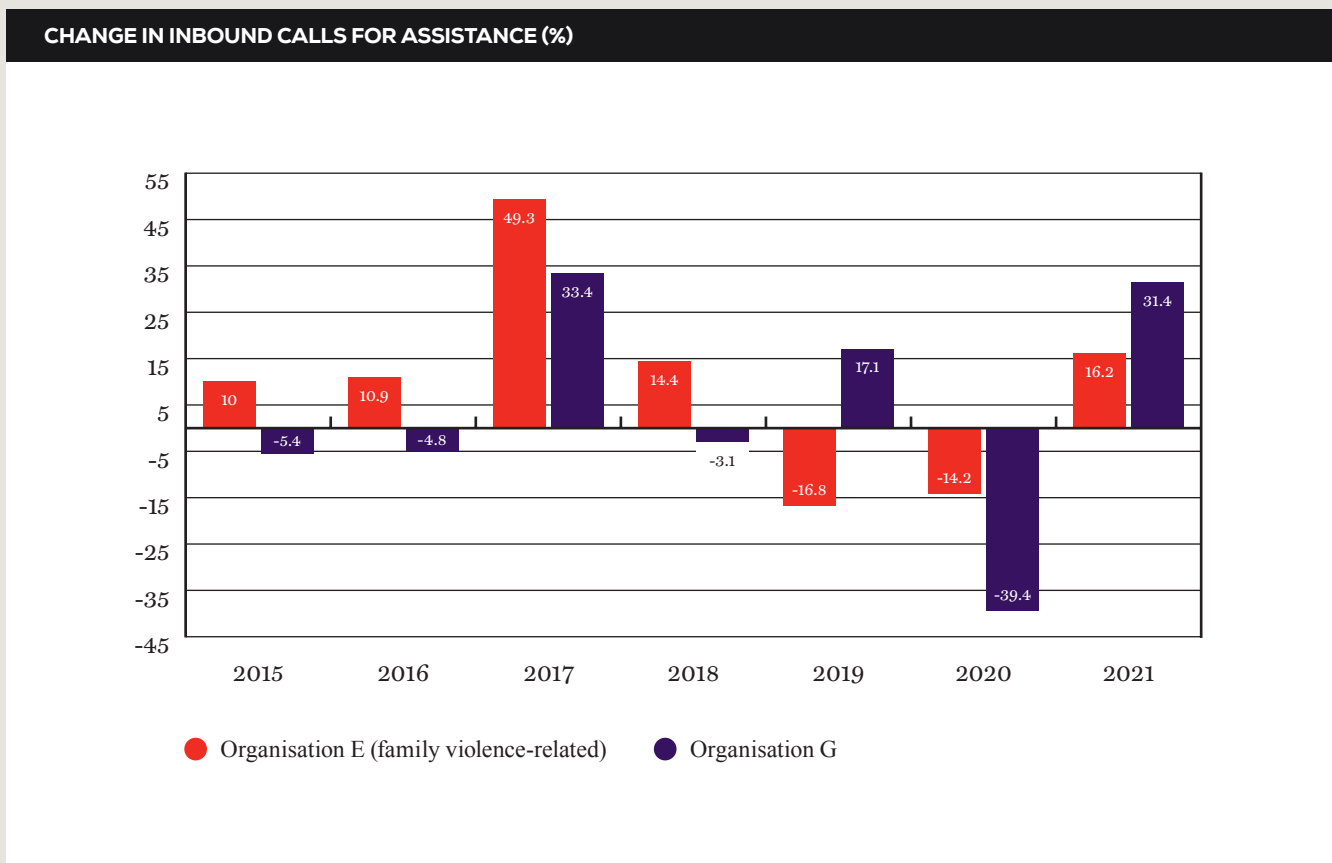
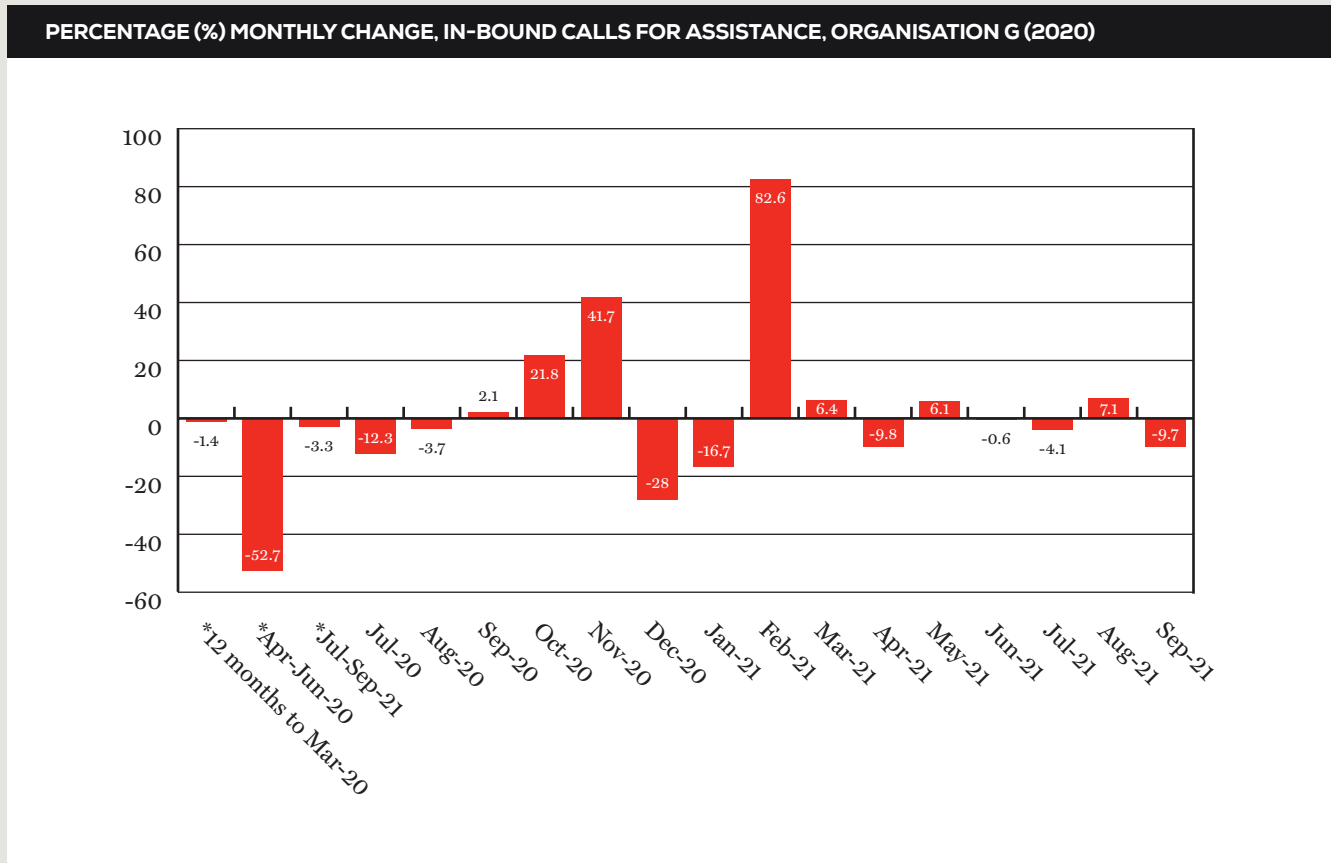
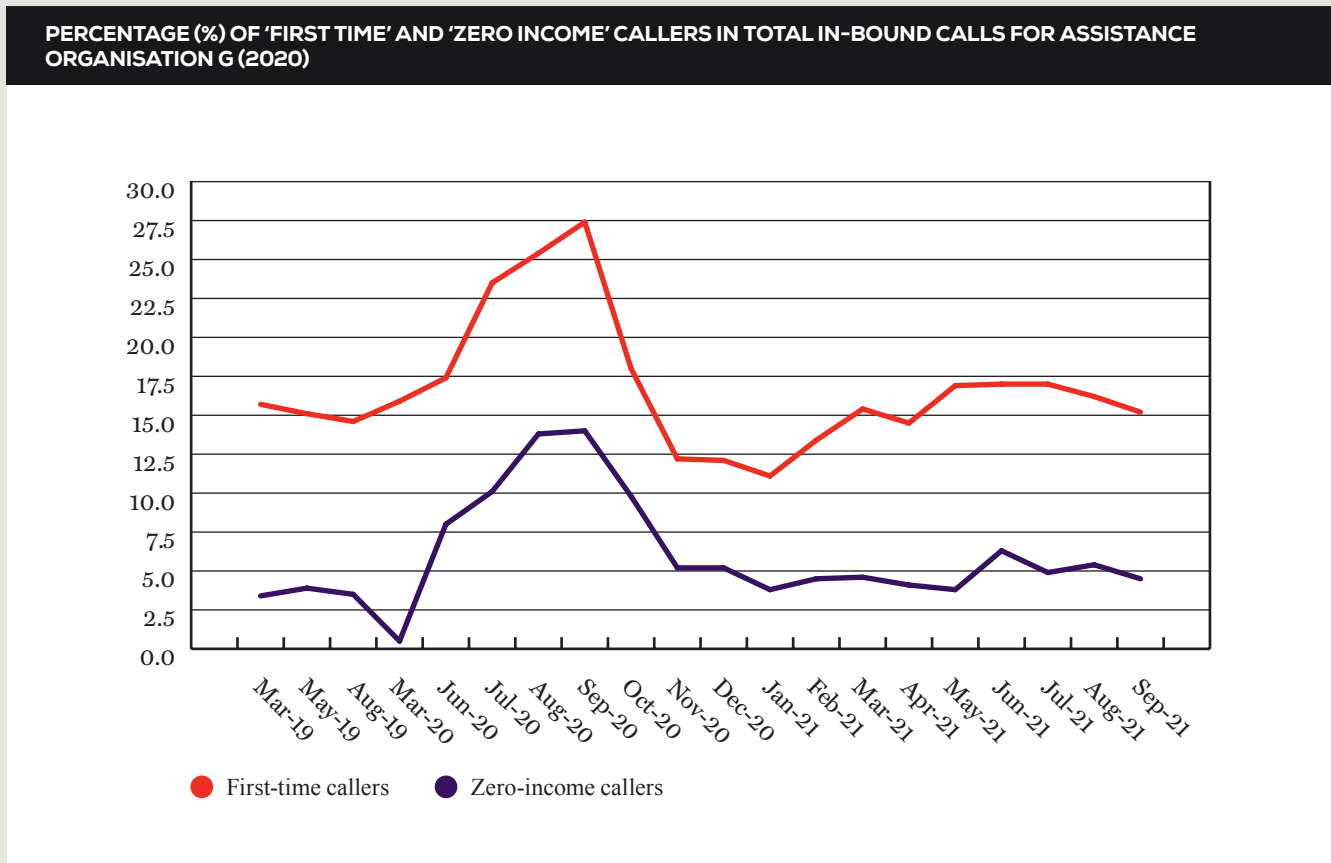


FIGURE 5.13



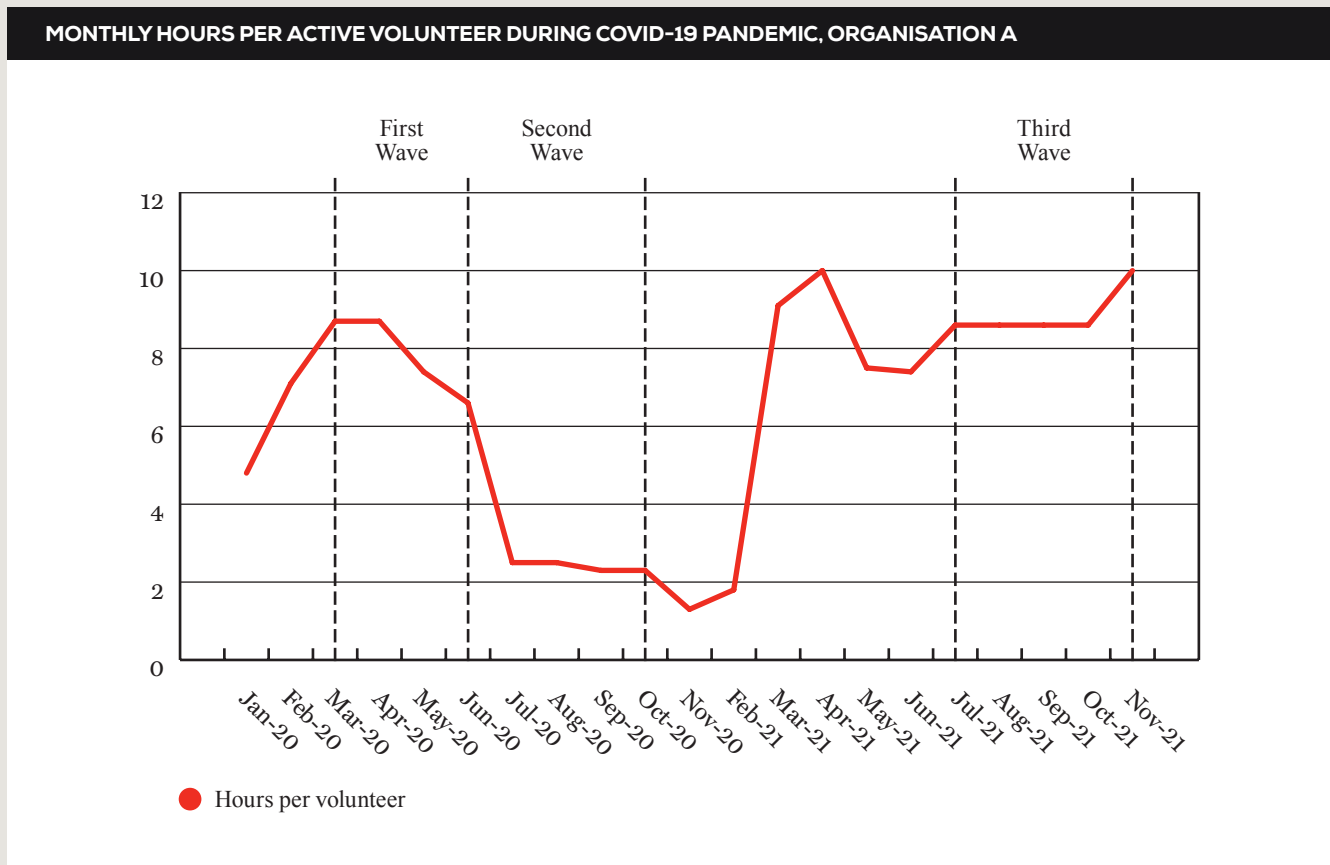
Note: Month-to-month except*

FIGURE 5.14



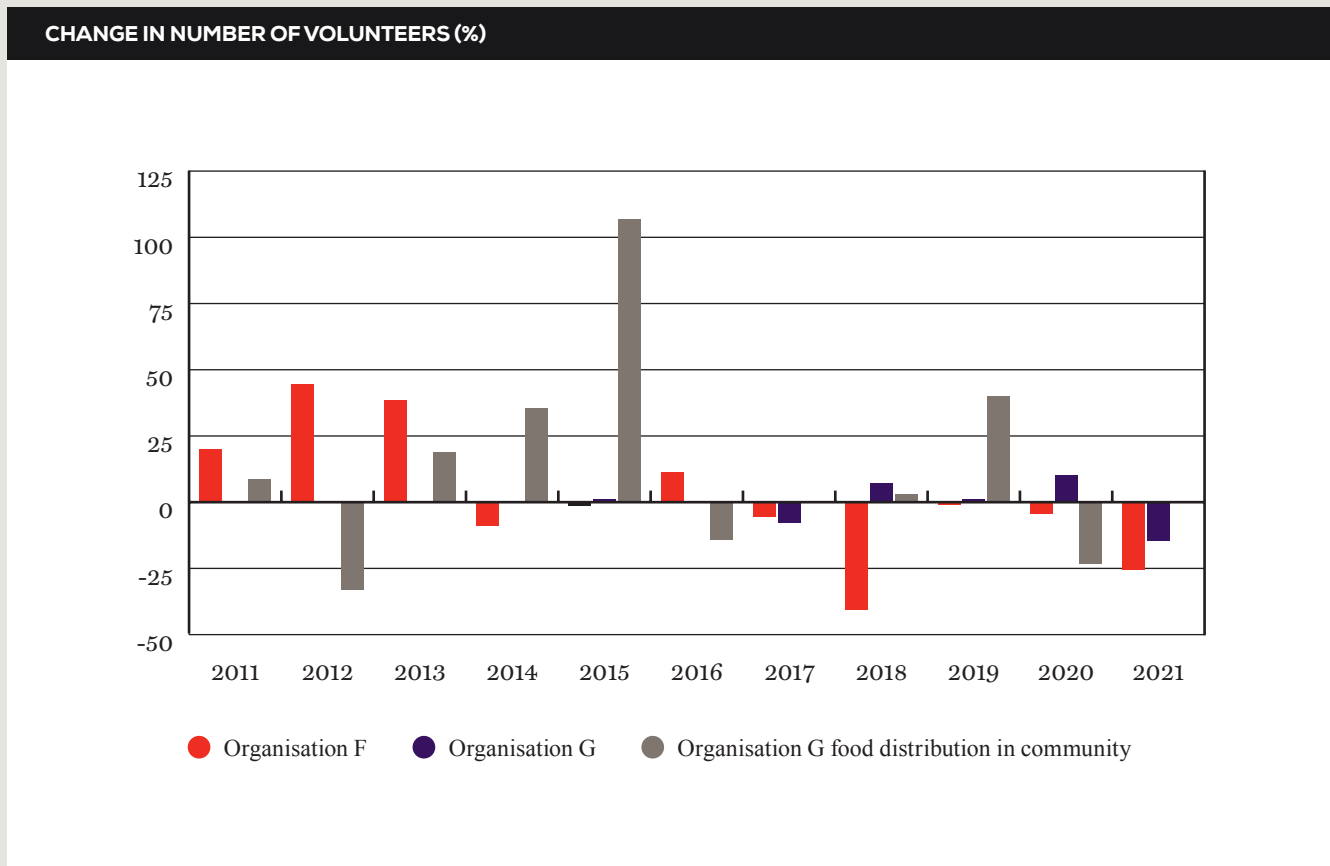
Note: Horizontal axis not to scale

FIGURE 5.15



Note: Figure excludes Dec 2020 - Jan 2021 and Dec 2021 due to lack of volunteer data

FIGURE 5.16



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